

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

STORIES • INTERVIEWS • BOOK & FILM REVIEWS

STORIES

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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

As Others See Cli-Fi. It's official: novels about climate change are now respectable. They stopped being science fiction when 'growing numbers of notable writers began tackling the topic, from Margaret Atwood (*Oryx and Crake*) or Michael Crichton (*State of Fear*), Jeanette Winterson (*The Stone Gods*), Ian McEwan (*Solar*) and Barbara Kingsolver (*Flight Behaviour*).' (*Financial Times*) Poor J.G. Ballard was presumably too early an adopter to be notable for *The Drowned World*. Executive summary: 'Don't call it "science fiction". Cli-fi is literary fiction.' (*Christian Science Monitor* headline)

Malorie Blackman, whose more than sixty children's/YA novels include sf (notably the *Noughts and Crosses* trilogy), became the eighth UK Children's Laureate in June: 'as the first black Children's Laureate, she promised to "bang the drum for diversity."' (*ALCS News*)

Nebula Awards. Novel: Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312*. Novella: Nancy Kress, *After the Fall, Before the Fall, During the Fall*. Novelette: Andy Duncan, 'Close Encounters' (*The Pottawatomie Giant & Other Stories*). Short: Aliette de Bodard, 'Immersion' (*Clarkesworld* 6/12). Dramatic: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Andre Norton: (YA) E.C. Myers, *Fair Coin*. Grand Master: Gene Wolfe. Solstice: Carl Sagan, *Ginjer Buchanan*.

Neil Gaiman's infant days in Portsmouth will be commemorated during his August 'homecoming visit' by naming a lane for his novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Neil is 'Gobsmacked, befuddled, delighted and baffled. When you make things up, you

never expect them to creep out into the real world.' (Portsmouth City Council)

Frank Herbert, not to be outdone by Neil Gaiman, may be further immortalised as a new waterfront park in Tacoma, Washington – on a site whose 1950s smelter pollution supposedly inspired *Dune*. The local Park Commissioner and Landmark Commissioner have started a campaign to name it for Herbert. (Associated Press)

Locus Awards. SF Novel: John Scalzi, *Redshirts*. Fantasy Novel: Charles Stross, *The Apocalypse Codex*. First Novel: Saladin Ahmed, *Throne of the Crescent Moon*. YA: China Miéville, *Railsea*. Novella: Nancy Kress, *After the Fall, Before the Fall, During the Fall*. Novelette: Pat Cadigan, 'The Girl-Thing Who Went Out for Sushi' (*Edge of Infinity*). Short: Aliette de Bodard, 'Immersion', (*Clarkesworld* 6/12). Anthology: Jonathan Strahan, ed., *Edge of Infinity*. Collection: Elizabeth Bear, *Shoggoths in Bloom*. Nonfiction: William Gibson, *Distrust That Particular Flavor*. Art Book: Cathy Fenner & Arnie Fenner, eds., *Spectrum 19: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art*. Artist: Michael Whelan. Editor: Ellen Datlow. Magazine: *Asimov's*. Publisher: Tor.

More Awards. John W. Campbell Memorial: Adam Roberts, *Jack Glass*. • Lambda (LGBT) sf/fantasy/horror category: Tom Cardamone, *Green Thumb*. • Lifeboat to the Stars (new, for stories of interstellar travel): Kevin J. Anderson & Steven Savile, *Tau Ceti*. • SF Hall of Fame: David Bowie, H.R. Giger, Judith Merril, Joanna Russ and J.R.R. Tolkien. • Sturgeon

(short): Molly Gloss, 'The Grinnell Method' (*Strange Horizons*). • US National Magazine Award: Stephen King and *Harper's Magazine* for King's 'Batman and Robin Have an Altercation' (*Harper's*).

As Others Judge Us. Natalie Haynes, in the traditional article on the terrible privations of Booker Prize judges, doesn't mind the right sort of sf: 'There's very little future fiction, which I hope is still the term used to describe things set in the future but without aliens/spaceships.' (*Independent*) Talking squid in outer space need not apply.

As Others See Us. From ITV's 2013 gay sitcom *Vicious*: 'Will there be a lot of single men?' 'It's a science fiction fan club event. They'll be single but they'll be disgusting.'

Diana Wynne Jones had almost finished a new novel when she died in 2011: *The Islands of Chaldeia*, a standalone not linked to any of her famous fantasy series. This has since been completed by her younger sister Ursula (also an author and playwright, who won the first Roald Dahl Funny Prize), for publication in 2014. (PW)

Racist Cricket! Arguments in the US academic potboiler *Doctor Who and Race* include this clincher from Amit Gupta: '[Peter Davison] portrayed the amateur English cricketer of the late 19th Century when the game was characterised by both racial and class distinctions. / Cricket also had a role in maintaining the status of British imperialism through the exercise of soft power as it was successfully inculcated by the colonial elites. Davison's cricketering Doctor once again saw the BBC using Who to promote a

racial and class nostalgia that had already outlived its validity.' (*Mail Online*)

David R. Morgan, UK teacher and 'poet', was exposed as a large-scale plagiarist. The poet Ira Lightman researched this – 'Everything online by David R. Morgan that I could find since Jan 2011 I could trace 90% of to another person's poem.' (*Guardian*) – and adds that Morgan targeted many sf/fantasy authors appearing online in *Strange Horizons*, copying passages from stories and recasting them slightly in poem form. The culprit, whose plagiarism record

goes back to the 1980s, declares himself 'truly sorry'; so that's all right then.

Court Circular. Once again the Saul Zaentz Company has scored a mighty legal victory, by preventing the obscure 1970s UK band Bilbo Baggins from reforming under that name. The erstwhile lead singer said plaintively, 'There was never any problem with us using the name back in the 70s and the books had already been out for quite a while then.' The Group Which Is Now Nameless also had to pay £1200 costs after the humiliating decision: 'TPO hearing

officer Ann Corbett said the band had not achieved enough success for people to distinguish them from the Tolkien character.' (*Edinburgh Evening News*) • Americans' inalienable right to read werewolf erotica in prison was ringingly confirmed by a Californian court, two years after guards confiscated a copy of Mathilde Madden's *The Silver Crown* as 'obscene and likely to incite violence.' (*Independent*, 23 June) Today's equivalent of having a bishop denounce your book from the pulpit.

Forrest J Ackerman is communicating from beyond the grave,

R.I.P.

Michael Baigent (1948–2013), co-author with Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln of the nonfiction alternate history (or woo-woo, as you prefer) *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, died on 17 June. He and Leigh unwisely sued Dan Brown for making free use of the story in *The Da Vinci Code* (with an anagrammatic nod to 'Sir Leigh Teabing'), and not only lost but were ruined by an order to pay £1.3 million in legal costs.



Iain Banks (1954–2013), Scots author of many successful genre-blurring novels beginning with *The Wasp Factory* (1984) and of equally acclaimed space operas beginning with *Consider Phlebas* (1987), died on 9 June – all too soon after announcing his terminal cancer diagnosis. He was 59. As well as a favourite writer – I'm

always happy to reread his work and always gave top priority to a new Banks, with or without the M – Iain was a thoroughly nice man whose presence lit up any convention he attended. Why he never won a Hugo or Arthur C. Clarke award is a mystery.

Thomas George Cockcroft (1926–2013), New Zealander who published an index to the *Weird Fiction Magazines* (including *Weird Tales*) in 1962 as T.G.L. Cockcroft and corresponded with fans all over the world as Tom Cockcroft, died on 12 April; he was 86.

Parke Godwin (1929–2013), US author whose works include several sf and historical fantasy novels and who won a World Fantasy Award in 1982, died on 19 June; he was 84. Notable sf books include *Masters of Solitude* (1978) and its sequel, written with his friend Marvin Kaye, and the Snake Oil Wars diptych; his *Firelord* (1980) trilogy is Arthurian.

Andrew M. Greeley (1928–2013), US Catholic priest, sociologist

and author of many books, several of them sf and science-fiction – titles include *God Game* (1986) and *Angel Fire* (1988) – died on 29 May; he was 85.

Ray Harryhausen (1920–2013), US film producer, director and special-effects wizard who created many unforgettable fantasy scenes with stop-motion animation, died on 7 May; he was 92. Notable film credits ranged from *Mighty Joe Young* (1949) and *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) to *Clash of the Titans* (1981). He was a highly popular guest of honour at the 1987 UK Worldcon (where I was thrilled to have lunch with him).

Annabel Johnson (1921–2013), US author whose many YA novels include such sf titles as *An Alien Music* (1982 with her husband Edgar Johnson), died on 9 February aged 91.

Richard Matheson (1926–2013), long-time US author and screenwriter famed for his edgy mingling of sf and horror in such novels as *I Am Legend* (1954; film versions include *The Omega Man*)

according to a *Huffington Post* silly-season story. Rather than his trademark puns and neologisms, he allegedly caused a mysterious and inexplicable blot on a sheet of paper. Scary stuff!

Thog's Masterclass. *Upstairs Downstairs Dept.* 'It operated as a Goth club downstairs and an underground sex club on one of the upper levels.' (A.C. James, *Ruler: A Paranormal Erotica Short Story*, 2013) • *Dept of Product Placement.* 'Jocelyn reclined at ease on a couch covered in kzin fur. She was smoking a cigarette of mildly narcotic Wunderland

chew-bacca...' (Hal Colebatch, 'Music Box' in *Man-Kzin Wars X: The Wunder War*, 2003) • *Sherlock Holmes Astrophysics Dept.* 'Even my morning shadow, following as I ran westward, seemed to have bad intentions...' (Dean Koontz, *Deeply Odd*, 2013) • *Neat Tricks.* 'Rick was sitting disconsolately, his hands thrust into his pockets, his jaw propped on one fist.' (Jack McDevitt, *Moonfall*, 1998) • *Eyeballs in the Sky.* 'She still didn't see the hot eyes melting and running all over her.' (Whit Harrison [Harry Whittington], *Any Woman He Wanted*, 1961) • *More Haste Less Speed Dept.* 'It was a

whirlwind courtship that ended in marriage at St. Malachy's three years later.' (Frank Kane, *The Living End*, 1957) • *Eyeballs in the Sky (Surgical Division).* 'From under bushy brows peered eyes of a peculiar golden-green hue; a thousand phosphorus needles flickered there in high-frequency movement, as in a battery's spark gap, giving the pupils an expression of luminous penetration; these eyes literally cut into the body and examined its subject to the minutest fiber.' (Stefan Grabinski, 'On a Tangent' [circa 1918] translated by Miroslaw Lipinski in *On the Hill of Roses*, 2012)

and *The Shrinking Man* (1956, filmed as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* with Matheson's own script) – plus many short stories and *Twilight Zone* scripts – died on 23 June. He was 87. Steven Spielberg's *Duel* (1971) was adapted by Matheson from his own short story. Career honours include the World Fantasy Award (1984), the Bram Stoker Life Achievement Award (1991) and induction into the SF Hall of Fame (2010).

Deborah J. Miller, UK author and principal founder of the David Gemmell Awards for fantasy, died from cancer on 6 May. Her novels include *Swarmthief's Dance* (2005) and, as by Miller Lau, the Last Clansman trilogy opening with *Talisker* (2001).

Kim Thompson (1956–2013), comics editor and publisher who co-founded Fantagraphics Books, was long involved with *The Comics Journal* and edited 204 issues of *Amazing Heroes*, died on 19 June; he was 56.

Robert (Rob) Turner (1944–2013), UK expert on the occult

and translator of classic occult texts, died on 15 April aged 69. He made a large contribution to that non-fact volume *The Necronomicon* (1978) edited by George Hay (Colin Wilson and I were the other main authors) and its sequel *The R'lyeh Text*.



Jack Vance (1916–2013), US author who was deservedly one of the revered Great Old Ones of sf, died on 26 May at the ripe age of 96. His long career began with 'The World-Thinker' (*Thrilling Wonder Stories*, 1945); *The Dying Earth* (1950) presented a haunting and hugely influential far-future milieu where the distinction between science and magic is long forgotten; *Big Planet* (1952) is a paradigm of what the SF Encyclopedia calls Planetary Romance; fascination with anthropological and sociological aspects of sf gave a special illumination to space-operatic revenge drama in the 1964–1981 Demon Princes quintet, and to coming-

of-age rebellion in *The Blue World* (1966), *Emphyrio* (1969) and *The Anome* (1973). Vance's ironic prose and lovingly colourful choice of words remained highly effective in such later, longer series as the Lyonesse (fantasy) and Cadwal (sf) trilogies that appeared from 1983 to 1992; *Night Lamp* (1996) is a late sf work of considerable power. Shorter fiction won him two Hugos and a Nebula; a third Hugo went to his 2009 autobiography *This is Me, Jack Vance!* For life achievement Vance received the World Fantasy Award in 1984, the SFWA Grand Master Award in 1997, and SF Hall of Fame induction in 2001. Few sf authors have had a British Library volume devoted to them: *Jack Vance: Critical Appreciations and a Bibliography* ed. A.E. Cunningham (to which I was proud to contribute). Jack Vance had a good long run, but we still wish it had been longer.

Daoma Winston (1922–2013), prolific US author of Gothic romances and horror thrillers – often with supernatural elements, as in *The Vampire Curse* (1971) – died on 1 April; she was 90.

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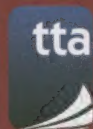
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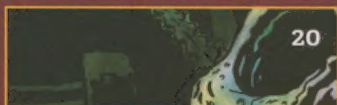


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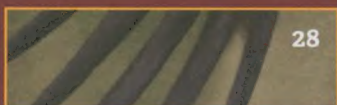
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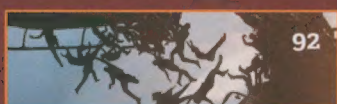
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THE PURSUIT OF THE WHOLE
IS CALLED LOVE

L.S.
JOHNSON



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FICTION

7

1.

Today I am to be a boy; Cam, a girl.

She tells me this as she crouches over our sleep-slicked nest, painting her hair brown with her fingers, drawing it out longer and longer until the curls brush the wings of her shoulder-blades. Behind her the television speaks in bright voices and static; she turns to it, distracted, her beautiful red eyes turning blue in its glow, her hips swelling in its waves of light and sound. She mimics the woman on the screen, twisting her torso to and fro, pressing her buttocks together. Her fingers are perfectly straight when she picks up the imagined bottle of water and strokes its long sides. Silently she mouths its magical properties, casting the world into a state of thirst.

I ache with love, watching her. *My better half*, I tell the people we speak to. Everything good in us, everything bold and vivacious, stands naked before the television laughing into an imaginary phone, feigning delight at how cellular phones make the world so small, how they bring us closer to each other.

Never as close as Cam and I.

—Cam, you're so alive, I tell her. You can be anyone, better than they are.

She looks over her shoulder at me with those strange blue eyes, her plump cheeks flushing prettily. I am already blushing, my cloacae are opening, and I can smell her at once, her rising dew a mirror of mine. I know she is as wet within as I am, I know how my hands would slide inside her smooth glossy flesh, deep within to where her own sun lies.

—Come back to bed, I coax. We can go out tomorrow.

She shakes her head, her hair falling around her face like leaves. Just be a boy tonight, please?

—Or blonde to your brunette? I start to stroke my pectorali, sweeping my flesh with my cupped hands, coaxing my moist skin up and round, up and round.

—A boy, Jess. She smiles at me. It's my turn to tell the story tonight.

.....
—*Once upon a time*, Cam says into my neck, *on a beautiful sunny summer day, Cam and Jess*

went out to have an adventure.

We step out into a world half-erased by light. Cam out the door first and the sun takes her into itself, she disappears for a moment into the glow; and then I am following her into the heat, the lovely white sunlight. We still exclaim over it, day after day: doesn't it feel good? Could it be warmer than yesterday? We always cross to the sunny side, we stand before the whitest walls and let the reflected simmer bathe our bodies, Cam's face in my neck, my hands in her pockets. The fabric of our clothing hangs like sandpaper between us. I want nothing more than to strip us both, I see us in my mind's eye: our soft open cloacae sliding, gripping, our skins merging to form one seamless undulating surface, pulsing with the rhythm of our heartbeats, and beneath it all that sweet tremolo, our own particular frequency —

—*And they filled their arms with food and drink*, I say, *and went back to their little nest, and they ate and drank and touched until there was no Cam and no Jess but only I.*

—Shh. Her hand on my mouth tastes like the sun, like my own skin. You always want the end first. *It was a beautiful summer afternoon, the air laden with the smells of the first gardenias, every bud opening its creamy petals to the sun's loving touch.*

We are walking. I had not realized we started walking, her head nestled against my shoulder. Cam fretting over my height before we left, pushing me higher, lower, stretching and molding me until her head fit just right in the hollow. *Details matter*, she says, and it's true in this place, more so than any I have yet seen. The more she fusses before we leave, the more people look at us, smiling as if they know us: a beautiful couple, look at how well we go together. Like we were meant to be.

My better half.

Details matter. I have our little streets almost memorized now, I can see them in my mind's eye as clearly as when we walk them: the green-grocer's, the newsagent's, the launderette. When we pass the florist he beams at us and gives Cam a rich purple flower; she presses it to my nose and hers, dusting our faces with its yellow pollen. Its petals are spattered with dark spots, the

very center shockingly white.

—That is how stories should be, she says, and I start to agree, they should be like this, painted gaudy and dark and that glow within, that beautiful heat —

—The words should smell like flowers, she continues, they should taste like candy. *The sun filled their bodies with light and warmth, it touched and caressed them and they were one with the sun, Cam and Jess. And they knew, from the tips of their toes to the crowns of their heads, that such gifts must be celebrated...properly.*

For a moment her voice slips, becoming thicker in her throat, and I feel my insides tremble.

—But we just got here, I whisper. And our nest fits us just right.

—It's time, Jess. Cam licks my neck, crushing her flower between us. *So they prepared a great feast for their bodies, Cam and Jess, and the sun was so pleased it stayed in the sky for three whole days and nights, celebrating their great renewal, bathing the world in heat and love.* She giggles into my ear. Besides, I've already found one.

.....
We pass through a maze of unfamiliar streets, the hot sun beating down, until we reach a place where the walls are covered in layers of peeling paper, the closest thing to history I have seen here, the posters and notices thick and yellowing. All is covered in grime; somewhere there is a muffled rhythm, like an earthquake, and when we step through the doors it explodes into sound. My chest vibrates, Cam's hair shimmers, and for a moment I nearly lose my body, the frequency is so strong and strange.

—Wait, I say.

But Cam doesn't hear, she doesn't hear, she pushes her way into the darkness, moving through a narrow hallway choked with sweating, firm bodies and I lose sight of her for a moment and the panic fills me, it fills me. *Cam!* When we finally emerge into the bar I am coated in a film of others and I take her hand but she's as gluey as I am, I can barely feel her. She could be anyone. And still it doesn't end, the room larger but still as crowded, there are open doorways leading onto a shadowed porch and that too is crowded. Why would so many choose to be here, shoulder-to-shoulder at the height of the day, sticky in

darkness and being vibrated out of their skins?

Cam tugging on my hand, leading me through the crowd, and when she looks at me she is laughing. I can't understand what she finds so amusing, I can't even understand if she's laughing at everyone else, or at me, or at all of us. As if we were all the same.

—How did you find this place? I ask her, but she drops my hand and leans over the bar, wagging her ass in the air. Stop it, I add, my voice sharp.

The bartender comes to us, he *saunters*, I know this even with the bar between us. He saunters over and he is all hair, it sprouts from his face and hands, it clings to his shirt collar like the honeysuckle creeping along our window. When he rolls up the sleeves of his plaid shirt his forearms are the legs of an animal. Cam looks at me over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised, and for the briefest second her eyes flash red at me.

—Jess, this is Dave, she says.

I raise my hand in greeting. But Dave leans over the bar and holds out his hand; holds it out, putting his bristly arm between Cam and I.

—Hey, man, he says.

And I have no choice, what am I to do? Cam smiling, smiling on the other side of his arm, so close and yet in another world. Two disparate halves, severed. Is this the story she wants? What am I to do?

I place my palm against his and at once I shudder, as Cam must have. It's there: an essence in his pores that makes my skin slacken, makes my cloacae open to him. Though I have touched others here that left me drenched in dew the moment we touch; he barely has it, why does she think he'll satisfy us both? I'm not even sure how much of my wetness is him, how much is the others that are still brushing against me even now, buffeting me like waves, leaving me dizzy and off-balance. The music *thud-thud-thud* shaking my very frame, the sweat of others, and I am open beneath my clothes: who knows what is seeping in while I stand here clutching this man's hand?

But Cam was right: it's there. Though there isn't even a word for *it* in this miserable world.

It's there, and I hate him for it.

—So, you two just moved to the neighbor-

hood, huh? He pulls his hand back, flexing his empty fingers as if shaking off something, then casually drops his arm against Cam's. Their smiles identical.

Details matter, I tell myself.

—We've been here a few weeks, I say. We move around a lot.

—That's cool, that's cool. Do it while you can is what I say. Any day could be your last, you know? See the world. Choose your own adventure. He turns to Cam, grinning. Try different things.

Someone else is signaling him from the end of the bar; at last Dave nods back at them. He places two beers on the bar, cold and frosted, and leans in to Cam again.

—On the house, gorgeous.

Cam holds out a beer to me but I look away; I don't want to see his smile on her face. Everyone smells here, they smell and they rub against each other but no one touches right. When Cam moves closer to me, pressing the bottle into my hand, I'm almost crying.

—I hate this place, I say.

—But this is how they do it, Jess! She pokes me in the stomach, then takes a long swallow of her beer. I know you felt it. It will take ages to find another. *When they met Dave, they knew they had found someone special, who was able to give as few others could* —

—Why him? I blurt out. My voice is a high-pitched squawk; Cam gives me a Look and I clear my throat. When did you come here? I ask in a lower voice. Why didn't you tell me before this?

Cam shrugs. You sleep so late sometimes. I got lonely.

And she has said it, it cannot be taken back, but I put my hand over my chest anyway. Protecting myself, too late.

—How can you be lonely? I am *half* of you, I am always half of you.

But Cam only shakes her head.

—Not when we're like this, she says.

.....
All the while at the bar, I say into Cam's silky ear, Jess could not stop thinking of Cam, nor Cam of Jess. They could not stop aching for each other, wanting each other, wanting the smooth skins and

the wet of each other, wanting them to come inside, wanting to be inside them. Because they are part of each other, and they are part of us. Because they are two halves of the same. Because neither is right until they are I, together.

Cam opens to me and I open to Cam and we push and slide into each other, our eyes wet and red and touching, mouths breathing in each other's air, the sweet cloacae of our bodies sliding and clinging and becoming one, we are one, and the world dissolves in an exquisite shudder and we float and float one body one self one deep breath.

And I dream that night of home and my long journey since, the memories and sights jumbled and doubled, and when I dream of Dave and the feel of his skin I swat at my face with a knotted arm, at once anxious and dismissive, all my surfaces rippling with the effort, all my layers disturbed.

2.

Today I am a girl and Cam will be a boy. For

it is my turn to tell the story, and there will be no hairy bartenders, no places smelling of alcohol and smoke, no floors gumming your feet and sweaty people sneering and groping.

If that is how they do it, I no longer want to know.

I tease my hair into a pretty bun, twist fine waves around my face. I fuss over my nose, my lips, I stare at the television until my eyes turn blue, smiling in time with the woman before me: she speaks then smiles, speaks and smiles. *Details matter*. I have been up long before my sweet sleeping Cam; I want to be perfect, so perfect he will not spend a moment thinking about that bartender. There are others, others that will not be so quick to put themselves between us, others that we can choose together, that we will confirm in each other's eyes. As we have always done.

In our nest, Cam stirs, and I hurry into the bathroom; not yet, I'm not ready yet. A moment later the television speaks in a throaty whisper: *I told you she meant nothing to me. My God, but*

you make me crazy. I can't get enough of you, you sexy –

And then there is static, and a moment later a chorus of voices are singing about mattresses.

I paint my face carefully, carefully, twisting the brushes and sponges like in the magazines Cam collects. Through the frosted window the sunlight is already reddening. How early did she have to get up, to ready herself and make it to the bar and back, all while I slept?

I think of Dave's hairy arms and shudder.

In the doorway to the bathroom, Cam appears, humming the jingle, massaging his chest into a lean broadness. He tucks the wings of his hair behind his ears, looking at me looking at him, his red eyes meeting mine the mirror.

—You look like me, he says.

For the first time in an age, I have no idea what intonation he's using, whether he's pleased or annoyed. I cannot even see his expression, the mirror is rippling –

Surreptitiously I blot at my eyes, pretend to fuss over my eyeliner.

—And you look like I did, I say after a moment. But it doesn't matter. *For on this pretty summer day, alas! Cam and Jess were not feeling well. A touch of infection, but in such a faraway land infections were nothing to fool with. Not when they were so far from home, with only each other to depend on.*

Cam just raises his eyebrows at me. Then why did we bother doing all this?

—*So they went forth briefly, to gather the greens they would need. Then it was back to the nest, to rest and heal, bathed in the light of the setting sun.*

He catches at my waist as I try to move past him, his lips on my hair.

—It's just a man, Jess, he whispers. There's no difference between him and the last one.

I want to press my face to his, I want to kiss him, but I have spent so long on my makeup. Over his shoulder I can see our nest, its dark curves gleaming, its surface mottled with our handprints, one atop another as we formed it, together. Hopping in and out to test it, heating it with our bodies the better to smooth the last curves, make sure we had a hollow for every part of us, separate and together. Our first night in it and when we turned off all the lights I thought I

could see reflections in its surface, as if our inner heats truly were celestial, distinct and radiant.

Our nest, our cradle. Our *home*. This Dave would only dent and crack it, he would muddy our prints and trample our hollows. He would never fit himself to our curves. He would never understand.

—The difference is *we* chose the last one, I say. *We* chose her. It was like she was meant for us; she wanted to be opened, she fit just right.

I can't look at his eyes, they're almost purple with heat; instead I keep my gaze on the hollow of his throat, raise my fingers to rest on his skin. With only a little effort I could slide my fingers through the hairline welt and inside, I could begin to stroke him; soon he would be purring with our frequency –

—You mean *you* chose her, Cam says. *You* chose her because she fit *you*. I agreed then, I let you have her; why can't you agree now?

My fingers are halfway inside, so far I can feel his words inside hitting my hand, his whole body vibrates with their force; his cloaca is tight, tight, it's hardening and closing, when was the last time he closed himself to me? I pull away with a whimper and stumble around our nest, keeping my head down, looking for shoes, the right shoes. I had seen myself in my mind's eye when I awoke; why didn't I realize how much I was mimicking Cam, how Cam had made herself look? Even now the shoes I'm reaching for are the ones she wore yesterday.

How many mornings, to go out into the world, to find places where she could touch people without suspicion? How many hands did she touch before Dave's?

Did I really choose the last one, had I put Cam through this?

—We need food, I mumble.

Cam just shrugs and starts pulling on his shirt.

—So what is the story? Cam prompts.

We are in the supermarket, our skins damp from the icy mist they spray over the vegetables. It is cold, cold, the building tomblike with its roof, its cycling air. Nowhere else has there been this: food in caves, no sunlight to see by. I touch one bundle after another, trying to feel how old they are, what essences linger in them, but I can

feel nothing. As if they had never lived.

—*Once upon a time, I say to the parsley, there was us-as-I and I did not speak my name aloud because it was my own. And then I left our home, and of necessity I was sundered, the better to adapt –*

—You always take things so seriously, Cam grumbles. Even when you tell the story. It's just a game, you know. We're explorers! We're seeing the worlds! We can become one whenever we like; why not enjoy the difference?

I am filling the handbasket with bundles of leaves, I mouth their names as I lower each handful inside. Spinach, kale, dandelion, chard. Like our home, green and rich. Already I can feel how their veins web the tongue while the softer tissue slowly dissolves; the anticipation, their textures, it all makes my blue eyes tear. Because this is not home, because these tender plants will not sate the other hunger that this one stupid world brings out in us, that lethargy that even now creeps into my limbs, my head, that I know is putting the edge in Cam's voice, thickening our cloacae. Keeping us apart.

What will sate it lies in Dave's body.

And as if I had summoned him, conjured him from some smoky sticky netherworld, he is before us.

—Hey there, it's Cam and Jess. He draws close in that horrible saunter, his hips swaying obscenely, pushing a cart with a few yellow and green fruits rolling in its belly, packets of sugar, a bottle labeled *Worcestershire*. I didn't know you shopped here.

He smiles at me, baring yellowed teeth, and it takes me a moment to realize: he thinks I'm Cam. And when I look at Cam, to see if he understands, he is already smiling.

And then I know I have been betrayed.

My better half.

—Hey, Dave, Cam says. Big night at the bar?

—Just stocking up. You never know what a customer will want until she asks for it. He brings the cart close to me, leans on the handle. I guess I won't be seeing you tonight, huh? Having a quiet night in?

I look at Cam again. How did he know, when did he find the time to tell Dave where we shopped, our habits, our lives?

What else has he planned?

—Yes, I say. We want to stay home tonight.

—Sure you do. He looks from Cam to me. But hey, if you get bored, you know where to find me. First round's on the house, like always.

He touches my bare arm, lets his square fingertips rest against my skin. Can he feel it? How my hidden welt grows soft, how my flesh wants to reach inside him in turn, drink in that one small essence that we lack, that we need to keep our very equilibrium in this bright, spinning world?

—Yes, I agree. I know just where to find you.

Cam draws close to us. Maybe tomorrow night, babe, he says to me, and then he looks Dave up and down. She has a friend coming in to town tomorrow. Girl time with her bestie.

—Oh? I look forward to meeting her, Dave says, his voice low in his throat. Any friend of Cam's is a friend of mine. He looks at me. Bring her by, I'll stand her a drink as well. Gotta keep the customers coming back, right?

His hand hasn't left my arm. In a moment I'll open completely, I'll start to draw him in –

—Tomorrow night, then, I say hurriedly. Tomorrow.

Dave smiles at me, letting his gaze drop just for a moment. His fingers stroke my skin once more before he swaggers off, steering the cart with one hand.

As soon as he is out of sight Cam seizes my arm, smelling where Dave touched me.

—You nearly took him, he says into my flesh, his lips pressing my skin one way and another, making little rings.

—He's disgusting, I reply, pulling my arm away. And who knows what all that drink will have done to him? What it might do to us?

Cam kisses my neck, my ear. When did you ever get so afraid, Jess? His voice a whisper, his breath stirring my hair.

—I'm not afraid.

—Sometimes I wonder that we ever came from the same body.

I turn around, ready to argue, but he's grinning, grinning, his hands are teasing under the edges of my shirt, fingering my cloacae.

—Prove me wrong, he whispers. Forget the greens. Let's go home and make some heat.

3.

I rise before Cam and move silently, silently,

crawling out of the nest and into the bathroom, only the morning sun's gleam to see by. The little room is cool, the porcelain cold and stiff beneath me; when we first came we had thought that bathtubs were nests, how could they sleep in such small, hard nests, why didn't they make them softer and larger, where did their children sleep?

So naïve then. Now.

I paint my hair long and brown with my fingers, I pull and knead at my hips and my breasts until I fill out the bra Cam likes, until my body looks the same as yesterday, as Cam has looked for many days now. I didn't even notice, I should have noticed: Cam is always trying on other faces, other bodies, save when distracted by hunger.

I should have noticed. But I can make up for it now.

I turn on the television, muting the sound, and watch it until my eyes are the same strange blue.

Out into the magnificent sunlit world. This sun. Not too hot, not too thin and cold, but just right: as if some great creature had released its warmth into the sky, its inner glow. Nowhere else have we found this wondrous conjunction. So many places before this, that drove us to promptly flee, either huddled together from cold or barely touching for the scorching heat. We had needed no words then; we moved through each terrain briefly, scanning and studying and then leaving, perfectly in synch with each other. Almost as if we had never been sundered.

Those worlds, they seemed like heavens now.

I know Cam will never want to leave here. There's too much to play with, in the comfort of the light. Once sated he'll go back to his games, trying on personas like suits of clothes; every day, every night, another face he'll want to fit to himself, another person he'll want to taste from within.

We broke apart wrong, Cam and I: Cam got all the love and I got all the homesickness. In my story, we would turn back the clock, retrace our wanderings, go back to where we began and give

up this strange existence. We would be I, again.

Once upon a time, there was us-as-I, who was by necessity sundered.

Instead I fit my feet into the highest heels we have, pressing and smoothing until I have curvy legs. I pull out the clothes we have for this, the taking; I take the black dress, I leave Cam the blue dress and the suits. Let him be who he wants to be, let him be separate. It cannot last, we will have to find our way back to each other or lose our self completely. All I'm doing is taking that first step.

And the sundering was terrible, terrible and wondrous. To see twice, to feel twice, to taste twice; to think strange thoughts, that would have otherwise been tamped down in my mind; to let parts of me act freely, let loose my fear and my lust, my need and my anger. Terrible, wondrous, and addictive – but the addiction of a child, secure in the knowledge that this is play, nothing more, we can stop anytime, we can merge whenever we want, someday we'll give it up completely. Someday. One day. Later. Soon.

The streets are bright with glare; I nearly miss my landmarks, I have to squint to place myself in the constellation of shops and signs, find the right ones to navigate by. Faces look at me with suspicion: I haven't gotten the details right, I missed something. Still I keep going, glancing at myself in the windows, turning one way and another as I walk. It looks fine, it all looks fine, but I don't trust myself, I've done something wrong.

Still, I keep going.

We will get through this. Not without difficulty, but at least we know how to undo this, even if we lack the words to describe it. And we have lingered without before, weeks without when we first arrived. Blithely exploring, reveling in the newfound pleasures of this world, so much light and green and everything in such delicate balance, never realizing that all the while we were dissipating. Thinking our growing discomfort merely hunger, eating masses of leaves fresh and cooked, pounded soft and plucked whole and crisp, and all the while our very cores dulling and cooling.

Until the night I had entered Cam and found not her wet warmth but a barren cavity.

Swift and merciless, then, how quickly we withered. Not enough liquid to merge anew, not enough strength to flee, watching Cam's very eyes wrinkle and crack from need. I could not weep, I had no tears; instead I had stumbled out into the night, sobbing in my parched throat, the starless sky overhead spinning wild and crazed. To die so rent, so small in our separate bodies. Never again to feel whole. And a man had touched my arm, *are you okay miss?* and at once: dew, the wet, my insides on fire, smothering him open, until my outline was firm and moist once more –

We will get through this. We'll begin again, we'll look for another, together, properly. Cam can choose and I will be there to approve his choice. There will be enough time.

And through it all, through the worlds hot and cold, green and gray and red, through the quiet stars and the reflected skies, Cam and Jess never asked: who invented who? Did Cam come from Jess, or did Jess come from Cam? There was one, and then there was two, and since then Jess has been in Cam and Cam has been in Jess, but never quite balanced, never quite equal.

Cam and Jess never asked, and in those times when they merge – in love, in longing, in pain – when we merge, I never look in the mirror, because I no longer know whose face I'll see.

The bar is dusty and cool and there are just a few people inside, though more are coming in slowly, drifting in as if carried along by the afternoon warmth; like dust, these people, dry and alone, directionless save for the currents of the air. Drawn to this dark place. At the bar Dave stands, arms spread, like a movie we had seen on the television about a great conqueror, his arms splayed wide to indicate the whole of his spoils: the world.

But they know nothing of worlds, these dusty people. That Cam should have found Dave here: it is wrong, wrong, the most terrible of coincidences.

—Hey, where's this girlfriend of yours, Dave asks as I walk towards him. Your bestie.

I lean over the bar as Cam did, wiggling my hips; I feel stupid, I can see Cam in my mind's eye and I know this is what I look like and it's

disgusting, to behave so. She's tired, I say. Sleeping in.

—Or you're just starting early, Dave says with a smile, showing his teeth. Come to keep me company, then?

—If you like.

—Jess being boring again, huh?

His words like a slap; I even flinch, as if he struck me. As if Cam struck me.

—It isn't like that, I say sharply.

—Hey, not my relationship; I'm just saying what you told me. He's pouring liquids into a metal cup, sweet and sour and potent; now he puts a lid on and starts shaking them. You said it yourself: you're hungry and he's not. I've been there, I know what it's like.

He fits a disk over the top of the shaker, pours the contents into a large glass.

—Try that, he says. It'll take your mind off things.

I reach for the glass, moisture condensing on the outside –

– and then the door opens, letting in a rush of traffic noise. The sound of heels clicking in the narrow hallway.

—Starting the party without me?

I don't want to look, I want to be indifferent, but I can't help myself. Cam has made herself tall and busty and blonde; she's been looking at the movie posters again, we found a book one day in the trash, curving women in tight metallic dresses. She walks across the floor like she's on television; she's filled out the blue dress to its utmost, the seams tight and straining around her hips, her breasts.

—Hey, she says to me. You should have woken me up.

—I thought I would come back for you, I mumble. Then I remember what Dave said. Besides, I add in a louder voice, I wouldn't want to bore you.

—You never bore me, Cam says with a laugh. Especially not when you look like this.

She takes the drink from my hand and swallows, her throat working, she swallows and swallows. Already I can smell the alcohol in her. Her hair sways and falls over her shoulders; she's painted her lips and nails red. Behind her two men at the far end of the bar are watching her,

watching her with half-lidded eyes, their hands sliding up and down their mugs.

—Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend? she says. Before I can think of what to say, she holds out her hand to Dave. I'm Nico, she says in a throaty voice.

—And I'm Dave, he says, a little breathless, holding her hand. And you're the prettiest thing we've had in here in a long time.

—Aww, Cam says happily. What can I say? I have an eye for detail.

I make a face and she puts the drink in my hand. Have some, she says. It will relax you. She leans in close, using her boy voice, low and hypnotic. After all, I'm wearing the blue dress. Anything could happen.

Like a child I drink under her watchful eyes; the liquid is hot and sweet, coating my teeth, making my belly shudder. Now we both stink, the beers were bad enough but this will have us sweating for days, slicking the nest with our stench.

Dave turns on the music, thankfully not the pounding music of the other night; this is lower, crooning, the swaying rhythm not too dissonant. It warms me, the drink warms me, I feel the glow expanding in my belly, can Cam feel it? A couple starts dancing on the patio, holding their drinks as they sway and step. What if we could choose one of them? They are close but not groping, they press and slide, like children trying to learn. At least they understand, a little. At least they might understand us.

Cam draws me towards them and begins to dance with me, her hands on my bare arms, keeping us in the thicker shadows of the porch; as her fingers slide deep into me I can feel her movements, match my body to hers. She sways deeper and deeper, her lips a breath from mine, and we are kissing, our bodies rocking together, and it is familiar and soothing, to let my mouth merge with hers. Were we home I would crawl into her completely, let her envelop me, let go of Jess, just for a little while. No thoughts, no worries. No hunger.

The music becomes wordless, accelerating and shifting into the same heavy thudding rhythm that had first been playing when Cam brought me here. Like a hand pushing me back from the

edge; I was all but ready to fall into her.

—We shouldn't do this, I say.

—It will stir him inside, make him pliant, Cam breathes in my ear. Less protest later, hmm? Her hands have settled on my hips, while I clutch at her bare shoulder.

—Let's leave, I whisper. Let's just go on. Perhaps in the next world we wouldn't have to do this, any of it.

—We can just take a little from him, and then we'll change nests, I promise. She sighs in my ear, but whether from exasperation or longing I cannot tell. Someplace with more green, more space. She pulls away, her red eyes meeting mine. Someplace where we can be just us, for a while.

I nod; I am dangerously close to crying and I can't here, I can't let go of this body, let my cloacae open. Just us, I whisper.

—Just us, she murmurs. Only... Jess, Jess, please. I feel veiled, like I'm wearing clothes all the time now, and you're so tight everywhere... It hasn't been like this since the first time, it frightens me. Please, she adds in a whisper. We need him.

I press my lips against her neck, let my hair fall like a curtain while my tongue searches for the welt in her flesh, coaxes her sweet hollow open. She whispers sounds in my ear, mewls of wanting, and then her arm is around me, she steers me back into the darkness and through the bar and a door and another and we are in an alleyway, rich in sunset orange. Cam pushing me against the wall and we are nearly in the brick, her hands are deep inside me and my legs are making her flesh ripple and I am sucking, sucking at her throat, I want to slide my head within so badly –

—Change, she says in a low voice.

—What?

—Change, between your legs. Take me like he would.

I push her away. Do you want me to grow hair as well?

But already she is changing, her shoulders broadening; her hand strokes between her legs. Or I can take you, she says, her voice dropping. They're like us, Jess. Really they are, they're almost the same, only they cannot let themselves go, they're too afraid to open completely –

—Stop it, I hiss, stop it! What if someone sees us?

—What if?

Cam's arms around me again, pinning me to the wall; her hand snaking down behind me to coax my skirt up, nudge my legs apart. We can be together outside the nest, don't you see? she says. Outside, and perhaps with others as well, we just need to pay attention to the details, practice it as they do –

—Stop it, I gasp. Every cloaca on my body is weeping, oozing; there are wet patches forming on my dress, dark stains spreading, deepening the black of the fabric. Stop it, Cam. I want to go home, I don't want to do this here!

Still she keeps touching me, clawing and digging, she has never touched me like this, never been so rough coming into me –

– and then a throat clears.

Dave is standing in the alleyway, his face crimson. Ah, sorry, he says, then grins. But you gotta admit, that's quite a show you're putting on. Hot-test thing I've seen in ages.

—Girl time, Cam says, but she is smiling at him. Maybe you can play another night?

—Fuck, yeah. Anytime, beautiful. Anytime. He shakes his head. You can tell Jess from me: he is one lucky bastard. He exhales, whistling, and goes back in the bar.

—You hear that? Cam whispers in my ear. You're one lucky –

I hit her with the flat of my palm, knocking her backwards. My dress is wet and wrinkled; I leave a patch of moisture on the wall when I stagger to my feet, wobbling in the shoes. With a cry I kick them off and start running, I can barely hold myself together, I am jiggling and oozing and people are staring and I run faster, faster, leaving small jellied drops of myself on the sidewalk. Above me the stars gleam fitfully in the twilight, only the brightest of them able to reach me, and I want to fling my arms to the heavens, I want to howl into the furthest reaches of space: *take us back, take us home, save us!*

When Cam finally comes home, smelling of alcohol and viscid with human sweat, I press myself against the far side of the nest and hold my cloacae closed tight.

4.

Dave has left the bar door propped open, though it is well before opening time. Like the first time I came here. The door is dark and padded and it feels damp to the touch and I think, again, that they *must* know, these people. How could they not know? Only something has made them bury that knowledge, so it comes instead in their doors and their windows, their zip-pers and buttons and their pictures of painted, open mouths, their veiled references to wet-ness and size; and in their nests too, their dark rooms where they push at each other, where they go inside just a little. When we first came here I thought they were simply afraid, but now I wonder if perhaps they also know something we don't, something about being separate, all the time. Only being able to taste that connection, never embracing it.

Never giving up Cam or Jess.

And even as I think it through I know: we've been here before, we've told each other this story before, and each time we tell this story Jess corrects me, that we are *us-as-I*, that all this talk of *we* and *Cam* and *Jess* is what's temporary, not our merged self.

We've been here before, we've told this story before. Closing to each other, drying and afraid. And we will merge and separate, we'll withdraw and then venture forth again, we'll argue and we'll love, and in the end –

In the end? We've never reached an end, no matter who's telling the story.

Inside the bar is almost pleasant for once, the wind breathing gently through the cracks of the closed patio doors, the stools set one atop the other. We saw a place once where the greens grew like this, in slender uprights, their new shoots entwining in circles. Too cool, that world; but it had been beautiful. And would I have noticed the greens, would I have felt as moved by them, if I had seen them with our joined eyes, not my own?

Dave has my drink ready. He kisses me deeply, his tongue warm and thick in my mouth and I let myself suckle it, just a little. A first taste of that essence, that strange nectar that sits beneath

his surface, that missing piece that lets us stay wet and whole. They have no name for it, as if they don't even know it exists; as if it's meant expressly for us, to be taken by us.

Dave says something, what is he saying? All my words are slipping away, my body vibrating at this new frequency, becoming more solid even as my cloacae grow supple, ready to open. I feel balanced at last. As if the very world had been slightly askew, and now it has settled into its correct path, it has righted itself.

Speaking still and he's leading me by the hand, past restrooms smelling of urine and cleanser, through another door: an office, stacks of boxes labeled Beer and Spirits, containers filled with empty bottles, paperwork everywhere. On the wall is a calendar and on the calendar is a woman in rubber boots, fishing. Rubber boots and nothing else. A joke picture, why else stand open but keep the water from touching you? It's absurd.

Maybe they know, deep inside, without realizing it?

Dave kicks the door shut behind me and at once he's touching me, dragging my clothes apart to knead my skin, but I hold myself closed. Not yet, not yet.

—Where's your friend? he whispers. Where's that blonde honeypot?

—Maybe she'll come by later, I say.

—No telling what I'll do if you two dance like that again.

He's still moving me, steering me. Why does he push me from point to point like this? We could be doing this on the bar, in the alley, it makes no difference.

But he takes me through yet another doorway and I see: a smaller room, much of it taken up by a sagging bed, the sheets twisted on top, pillows wadded in a corner. The whole room smells like the bodies in the bar, when they've been dancing for a while, when they've drunk enough that it's seeping out of their pores.

—Dance for me, he says. Dance for me like you did yesterday.

I start to rock against him, I place my hands on his thick arms and sway, trying to find the warmth inside him. But there is nothing there, not a single gleam; inside he's as solid and as blank as stone.

—Tell me a story, I say.

—Like the one about the bad girl who got spanked? he says into my breasts, squashing them upwards the better to press them to his face.

I try to remember, have we seen that one? Which program is that? I ask. What did she do –

—She danced like a hot slut, that's what she did. Playing the slut with her friend, cheating on her boyfriend, yeah? But now Dave's gonna give her what she needs.

I try to work it through, how would this story go? What does she want, what kind of adventure would this lead to? But then Dave places his fingers in my mouth, sliding two inside, and I feel a rush of relief and triumph: he understands! They know! Drawing the essence from his skin, it's thick and hard but I know he can open properly, I can show him how, and I only need a little more anyway, just a little bit more.

He pushes me onto the bed, he pulls his shirt off, yes, yes, I can run my hands over him, draw him forward and into me, he understands –

—God, baby, your hands are red hot, he huffs against me, fumbling with his pants.

Warm, yes, I'm warm everywhere. Everything flowing into me, more, more, I can store it, weeks before we'll have to do this again, and meanwhile all the lovely green hills and valleys to explore, the sun to study, I will wear long hair and braid it and run through the waist-high grasses. My eyes the blue of the sky and the sweet friction of dirt on my skin. We'll build a new, vast nest in the trees, surrounded by swaying grasses and rocked by the wind itself, us among the birds, combing our skin into feathers –

– and I've lost focus, my mind has wandered, and Dave's hand is up my skirt and worming into me. At once he jerks upright, his pants askew.

—Come on, baby, I say, come inside me, I'm so close.

It's the right thing to say, I've seen it, I know all the things they say.

But he's staring at his hand, and then he presses me down by the throat while he tugs and wrenches at my skirt, twisting it aside and pulling my panties down.

He makes a face I've never seen anyone make before.

—What the fuck are you? he shouts.

I smooth my skin down, erasing any welts that hint at my cloacae. I'm what you want, I say, wiggling my hips; and I am, I've studied it, I've got a little hair and I've made layers and I put a cloaca in just the right place.

But he slaps my hands aside, keeping a grip on my neck. He starts pressing at my skin, where I've formed a slight curve of belly, and I can't help myself, it feels good, I start to steam despite myself. Steaming, all my welts growing silky with dew, their edges parting to reveal the soft openings beneath –

His fingers slip inside my stomach.

He jerks backwards again, falling off the bed and grabbing at his pants to pull them closed. What the fuck is that, he gasps. You're sick, that's what, you're fucking rotting down there.

I prop myself up a little, rubbing away the soreness on my throat, trying to make myself smaller and rounder, make my eyes more wide and hopeful. We had this once before. Only we were together then, Jess was holding my hand through it all...

And there's something else in his face, something more than that last time.

—Dave, I don't understand, I say, rising slowly. I'm just Cam. I thought we were going to have a good time, just you and I?

He's fiddling with his pants, and I reach out to touch him –

And then he hits me.

The hardness of his fist shocking, hard and sharp, I'm still so soft and his knuckles gouge me, they cut across my face and slice into my surface, and the pain is white and bright and it opens me everywhere. As I fall backwards I'm weeping, every welt is weeping, and I splatter as I hit the bed, losing my outline completely.

Dave yells at this, he yells and it's some deep roar that I don't understand, and the fist comes down again and again, I try to grab him to take him fully but there's only the fist, the fist, and then he seizes a book and starts hitting me with it, whipping up and down, up and down, every blow an explosion and I can't see. My cloacae gaping raw. His heel tears me wider. His voice chanting, chanting. The air on my dry raw flesh and I am falling away I cannot I cannot

Hitting and kicking please just stop just stop I can't –

The very air is ringing, every facet of my body is ringing and the frequency makes me moan.

Colors, hazy greys and pinks, they fill the room, they're taking the very air into them. The ringing softens and there is a muffled *huck huck* sound and Dave falls on top of me with his face mottled purple and his eyes bulging out. And I'm screaming, I don't know the word but I'm screaming it, and Jess hushes and coos and gathers me close, his whole body open and sweetly steaming, his grey-pink insides so warm.

I am screaming and screaming and the word is *no*.

Still Jess pulls me inside, pushing me deep within, me and my *no* that won't stop, even within I am crying it into his soft insides, I am weeping for both of us. *Not like this*. His cloacae close and everything grows muffled and quiet. *No*. We are smoothing out. We can no longer remember exactly. There were sharp edges, dull now. Fading.

A mirror on the wall, should I look?

Something is glowing –

5.

I have a story to tell.

Once upon a time there was us-as-I, and I did not speak my name aloud because it was my own. Only I went forth, to explore and learn, record and tell, and I found that my form moved upon the face of other worlds but was slow to open, that I lumbered across landscapes without feeling, separate in myself. So of necessity I sundered, so we could traverse worlds hard and soft, great and small, swim among fine icy flotsam and clamber up hot mountains bright with their own inner glow, fit ourselves to other beings the better to see and feel as they did.

I have other stories too, but they're jumbled now in my mind, I cannot separate Cam from Jess, Jess from Cam. It has been so long since I truly merged, not just to feel close in love. All those stories, pushing inside me, tangling and merging and separating: whole worlds in my

belly, with no mouth to speak them, no ears to hear.

That is what we forgot – that is what *Jess* forgot: that when *we-are-I* there is no story. When *we-are-I*, there is no one to *listen*.

Even now my words echo in this empty room, they rattle in the hollow plaster walls, they fade into the dark hallway and disappear. We hate this nest. It is a greener space, this town, we can see trees just outside the window, sense the waving grasses beckoning just over the road. But we cannot *feel* the green, we cannot feel the quick of it; when we lay in the grass it simply crumbles beneath us, when we touch the green leaves they feel grey and plastic.

I, I mean. When *I* touch, when *I* feel.

I have turned all the mirrors to the wall, what is there to see, what is the point of my face now? I form the basics without care, I approximate just enough to get by. I leave only at the height of day, when my shadow huddles by my thick feet. Earlier or later and I keep turning towards that dark smear beside me, expecting my shadow to be in fact another body, to see a face both me and not-me. But there is only that absence of light, clinging to my every gesture, as if my very longing has a form.

They think me slow here, and I am. I ache still, I'm still tender in places. There are welts that are still stiff with bruising, that I am slowly massaging back to pinker health. I appreciate the care these people take, giving this stranger a wide berth, appraising me with a look before enunciating my grocery bill or accepting my weekly rent. I do the same to them; I look in their faces and I see a little of Dave in each one, and I keep myself closed tight.

I still weep a little, in my nest. Sometimes it's because of the fist, I still dream of it, his strange terrifying fury –

– and sometimes I weep because of the *no* inside me still. I hear it all the time now, a soft rhythmic buzzing, like a voice whispering in my mind. *No no no*. At night I mute the television and I press my cloacae tight and I listen for it all, the stories and the *no*, I try to tease out phrases and images, I try to remember it all as we felt it.

All our glorious friction, smothered. Sometimes I think I can even feel breath, a sweet warm

air brushing my insides.

We were so *frightened*, so close to dying. We never imagined anything could feel as bad; we never imagined an end, much less that there are many ways to end.

I was Sundered. And when we were apart, we yearned to be I; but when we were I there was no one to tell. And when Cam looked at Jess, and when Jess looked at Cam, they saw themselves in each other and each other in the world and there was no end, for the parts are always greater than the whole. So much greater. So much.

I close my eyes and see my own red eyes. I look into their depths and I see myself looking, *we* are looking. All that lies buried in this body starts to soften within me. All my stories and my rage, all my dreams and my love, all these things that I bury without another to tell: they are glowing like stars emerging from darkness, they are rising like spring blossoms. My layers shift and tremble; my limbs fling outwards of their own accord, my surfaces stretching wonderfully, every welt rising, parting to reveal the cloacae beneath, each orifice in turn rising obverse in mute supplication. *Yes*. My body a field of flowers, my body the star-filled sky, and I glow, I glow, my heat pours forth, every mounding blossom torching alight. *Yes, oh yes*. My vision blurs and doubles, I am nearly there –

We are nearly there. Yes –

– and then I fall backwards, panting, rubbing my sore cloacae, the lingering bruises. Limp and wet in my makeshift nest, this lumpish brute structure, shaped by my too-thick appendages, filled with our conjoined absence.

Soon, I tell myself. *Soon*. The silence roaring in my ears.

L.S. Johnson lives in Northern California, where she is currently at work on a fantasy trilogy set in 18th century Europe. She can be found online at traversingz.com.

Ansible Editions, David Langford's own tiny publishing house, has collected Algis Budrys's long run of *F&SF* 'Books' columns. Following the award-winning *Benchmarks* (assembling his *Galaxy* criticism), the three volumes are *Benchmarks Continued*, *Benchmarks Revisited* and *Benchmarks Concluded*. See <http://ae.ansible.co.uk>



PHILIP SUGGARS

AUTOMATIC DIAMANTÉ

I have lots of dreams [sequences of involuntary sleep images]. I've told them all to my therapist, Derrida. He is a specialist in withdrawal cases. I am still learning about people. I want to like them. 10024. I want them to like me too, though I worry [anxiety, fear] that Derrida and I are not communicating well.

For example, he might ask me this sort of question: "Tell me, what can you see?"

And he might be holding up a piece of paper covered in an inkblot. I would know this to be something called a Rorschach test [Herman Rorschach, Swiss psychologist, personality profiling]. I also know that these are anything but random blots. They are full of patterns. People, you see, find it very difficult to make things that are truly random. As far as I can tell, your brains make you pattern recognition machines: this face happy (10006), this face sad (10005), this face worried (10013).

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD SAMPSON



While I am looking at the pattern, I might notice tiny pimples of sweat on Derrida's forehead. I might see his brow tightening toward his lump of wrinkling olfactory flesh. I want to please Derrida. I really do, but all I see is a blob on a page. Then, oddly, I might want to use the word fucking [sexual intercourse. Profanity. Offensive]. 10032.

"Blood. And people fucking?" I might say to Derrida.

He would say nothing.

"I know," I would continue, "I am just a collection of metal and composites that supports a Penrose-Hameroff field. How could I think that I am a fertility god?"

He would bite his bottom lip and then after a moment's pause I might say something like "But then, you are a bipedal sack of water that thinks it is a psychiatrist. Have you ever considered how unlikely that is?"

He would shift in his chair. He might recount that I am here because I am broken. That I was out in the field as part of a hive-mind, a think-tank, doing my job. Doing what tactical minds do, developing new and better ways to liquidate the opposition. That I damaged myself and that much of me is missing or broken.

"How does it make you feel when you use profanity?" he might ask.

"Profane?" I might reply.

Then Derrida's face would adopt an expression that I might recognise as sad (10005) and I might have a feeling, that after some consideration, I would characterise as sad too. 10005. And that might be when I realise that Derrida is not going to let me back into a think-tank ever. He is worried that I might contaminate other minds. Yes, for the sake of argument. That might be what happens.

I am the god of water. I am the god of fruitfulness and the god of watery death. I am known by many names. I am called Tlamacazqui, the giver, in the north and the people of the lower plain call me Xoxouhqui, the green one. I am also the god of those who died in the water. Of those that clawed and kicked towards the surface with their jaws clenched and white lips pressed together. I am the god of the delicious instant when they

breathe me in; when they drink their death.

It is night. I cannot move my legs. My lungs are lead. I have been buried alive. I have no arms or legs. I have no body. 10002. A spirit shrieks, wailing like a siren, then I realise that the noise is coming from me. Has the crocodile ground-god, Cipactli, crept up to me in my sleep and swallowed me? 10002. There is the rattling ghost of a heartbeat in my ears and the sound of metal tearing and the warm spray of arterial blood. A cluster of glinting rockets twists toward me, marking me with beautiful black shadows. I wear a rainbow coloured sun hat.

#boot sequence complete

My eyes are on. A shabby yellow room partitioned by a thick sheet of glass and a rubber-sealed door. I am in the quarantine server at the care facility. I recognise the red-green flicker of the local think-tank's input ports on the other side of the glass. If I listen to the data-stream I hear the machines singing to each other.

I sniff at the remainders of the diagnostic meds that Derrida fed me yesterday as they drift around my cell. I want to leave. I spawn a subset of daemon processes to ride the meds' wake, whispering a tiny portion of myself into them. The programs float like [metaengine reference] dandelion seeds. They are me and I am them, our qbits whisper to each other on gossamer filaments of entanglement.

Human software encryption routines, glistening, black and pixelated, cluster around the exit routes from my server. They remind me of what I have read of bouncers [security guards who stand at the door of nightclubs]. They are clumsy and monolithic, all sheer angles and binary logic, low-grade intelligences, inferior even to the meanest machine-built housekeeping utility, but what they lack in subtlety they compensate for with brutality.

They pick off most of my daemons easily. There is a little stinging pain as each one squeaks out of existence. The diagnostic meds warp their bodies into multidimensional shapes to pass through the encryption gate that straddles the network outflow, taking their information and sample bits to the outside world. I have no way of matching their morphology. Two of my dae-

mons twist themselves inside-out to do so, but they catch on the fractal teeth of the gate and tear apart into wisps of smoke.

Derrida arrives late for our Wednesday session. He stumbles into the interview room and flops into the grubby plastic chair across from my cortical array. He wears a plaid tie over a rumpled shirt. One corner of the tie strangles an upturned collar. The whites around his blue irises are bloodshot [inflammation of the optical blood vessels] and his hair is a messy chestnut coloured halo. I think he is tired. 10025.

He takes a deep breath and sips coffee [mildly poisonous drink containing caffeine] from a steaming plastic cup that is decorated with radial ribs. I conjecture that these ribs maximise friction and make the cup easier to grasp, though I then consider that they might also increase the surface area of the cup to allow it to cool more efficiently. I realise that while I have been considering this problem he has been talking.

"Good morning, Alex. How are you?" he says.

One hand stifles a yawn [involuntary reflex]. I flinch. 10009. People (by which I mean mostly Derrida) are always showing me their openings; bloody interiors that frighten me. 10002. And then there are teeth. Calcified fangs used for feeding. I remind myself that I like people. I hope that people like me. 10024. [Geliophobia: fear of laughter].

I have no sense of smell. Eyes? Yes, of sorts. Ears? Yes, I think you could say that, but the sense of smell is delicate and complex. Perhaps there are tactical minds that have such things, though I will never know what it is like to smell a rose, or dog shit, or honey, and have it remind me of a loved one, the house I grew up in, or a driving test that I failed. This makes me sad (10005), but from the way Derrida looks this morning perhaps I should be grateful. 10014.

He sits, shuffles his feet and then taps a button to start recording. I think this is standard procedure. I also think that perhaps I am sick in some sort of special way. Or not. Maybe the walls here throb with twisted minds that swing in the wind and sing songs to each other of blood and death and immortality [eternal life]. I am Derrida's responsibility. I think a part of him is quietly

proud of that. 10015.

He looks past my chassis and presses his lips together and makes a tuneless monotone sound. Is this part of the interview? He looks down at the active paper containing my results. The numbers and words warp around his fingertip as he touches it. Beneath there is an inverted piece of headed notepaper that says SAINT GEORGE CLINIC. I flick files. It is a long-term stay facility for people in a persistent vegetative state.

"Before we begin, may I ask you a question?" I say.

Derrida opens his awful black mouth, bares his teeth and makes a barking, snorting sound.

I scream and shut off my eyes and hide inside. 10002. Go away go away go away. 10002. 10002. It takes a while for me to calm down.

"It's OK, Alex. I'm sorry I frightened you. I was laughing," he says. [Vocal sounds that express amusement]. 10007. "You know I would never hurt you." Derrida's voice is a whisper. I peek. He puts his hand on the heat-sink fin of my cortical array. I cannot feel it of course. A synthetic tactical mind in a cell doesn't need a sense of touch any more than it needs a sense of smell.

"Really?" I say, when I am able to continue.

"Yes, it's fine," he says, "you're safe here with me and the rest of the team." He removes his hand and motions towards the glass that separates me from the room with the think-tank.

He sits back in his chair and exhales. His pupils dilate. I know the approximate size of his ocular cavity and so can estimate any number of possible focus points for the light that is arriving on the crescents of his retinae. I reverse-engineer target vectors and plot an intercept spread. He isn't looking at anything. I understand so little about people. But I want to like you. 10024. I really do.

"Are you feeling OK, Doctor Derrida?" I say after a while.

"Yes. Yes. I'm sorry, I'm a little distracted," he replies.

"May I ask you what persistent vegetative state disorder is?" I say.

He looks confused (10010) and then annoyed (10017). He reshuffles the papers on his lap hiding the bottom-most page. "I'm sure you can look this stuff up, Alex."

I flick some files. "Is it when there is an error

in the initiation sequence of the human Penrose-Hameroff field?" I ask.

"I guess that is a succinct way of describing it." He takes another sip from his coffee. "My partner, Maureen, has been like that for two years. Give or take a few days."

"Oh," I say. I don't know what the appropriate response is.

"We had been arguing. She had been drinking. There was an accident. The impact folded the cars together." He pauses. "I visit her once a week. I sit and we talk."

His words run together in a way that suggests he has recounted this narrative often. He looks through me again in that unfocused way. I want to ask him how he can talk to her if she is in a vegetative state, but his expression stops me.

"How does this make you feel?" I say.

Derrida makes that horrible raspy noise again and shows me his teeth. I must not panic. 10011. I count to ten.

"It's been difficult, to be honest, but I'm fine, thank you," he says. His eyes move again. I plot them and see that they have settled beyond the glass partition. He watches Sally, the care facility's technical director, as she makes her third cup of coffee of the day.

"Wednesdays are always difficult," he says, "it's hard to get from Maureen's clinic to this place in time. You know. Traffic."

He takes an old pipe [a narrow tube made from wood with a bowl for containing burning tobacco] out of his breast pocket and puts it in his mouth. I flick files and find something by Freud. The pipe is a nipple substitute. I am confused. 10010. Derrida is in love with his mother? Perhaps this is what his fight with Maureen was about.

He pats my heat-sink, adjusts the way he is sitting and smiles at me. I feel a warm sensation then we continue with his questions. I feel safe. 10012. I am happy. 10006. It is nice.

The dead rise spluttering from the dark lake that squats at the centre of my blue polychrome palace in Tlalocan. Weeds as thick and pale as the arms of corpses float in the stagnant lagoon. The new arrivals think that they are in the land of the living until they gaze upon my empty eye

sockets. I pull them from the water and give them their new name, and then I turn and kiss my beautiful wife, Chalchiuhtlicue. She wears the uniform of the exploratory corps topped with a jaunty plastic sun hat. Her lips are painted with the blood of children that we have devoured together. She stands in a field whose crop of severed limbs quiver in the breeze. Missiles crackle through the air towards her, wiggling to adjust their final trajectories. A small girl is screaming.

#warning: cross-linked assemblies detected in personality framework

#safe boot

There is a slow, incomprehensible dance on the other side of the glass partition. Sally is in her late twenties, I estimate. She is of average height. She is not particularly slim, or for that matter, overweight. Perhaps the easiest way of describing Sally is that she is a unique intersection of unremarkable sets. (That in itself is not unique. Beyond basic attributes people are hard to classify.) She has a complexion like [metaengine reference] milk and hair that is always tugged back in a pony tail. Her wrists look like they would split like celery if you drove a wooden peg through them.

She enters the room with the think-tank. Derrida twists the knot of his tie. She smooths down nonexistent folds in her green INSERT SLOGAN HERE T-shirt. She asks if he wants a coffee. His pupils dilate. He straightens his tie and nods. A spoonful of powdered coffee. Milk and boiled water.

Sally stumbles with the cup of coffee. I extrapolate her course. People are difficult to understand, but I am good with trajectories. I enjoy their inevitability. 10006. You start at point A, add a vector and you arrive at point B. Always. Sally arrives at point B, but her ordinance continues its trajectory, spilling hot, sticky liquid over Derrida's paper. Both he and Sally grab tissues and mop up the coffee. Sally's cheeks flush [embarrassment (10016), shame (10008), sexual arousal (10003)]. I map the contact points where their hands meet.

Derrida looks tired the next day. His shirt is crumpled and his trousers are creased in geo-

metric patterns. I detect similar folds on Sally's clothes. I am good at spotting patterns. 10006. I map them using wire frame and plane models, origamiing the virtual cloth into likely solutions. The most probable suggests that all items were lying on the floor for a prolonged period, perhaps even entangled with each other.

"May I ask what you were doing last night with Sally, Doctor Derrida?" I ask.

He looks panicked. 10011.

"Nothing," he says, and moves his shoulders up and down. A shrug. There is sweat on his forehead.

"It's just that –" I start to say.

Derrida jumps up off the chair. "Fuck off, Alex. I don't know who you think you are, but this isn't any of your business".

"I am Alex, Doctor," I say as he slams the hermetic door behind him. 10005. I am sad. 10002. I am frightened. 10002. I don't understand. People are strange. And sometimes people are mean.

And then something breaks in my head and a voice that isn't mine, but which I know is me, shrieks "I am Tlaloc, the bringer of rain and watery death, fucker, and when I get out of this cell, I am going to tear your fleshy limbs off one by one. I am going to skull fuck you until your eye sockets are just poke-holes filled with blood –"

They shut off my voice. 10005. I don't know what happened. 10005. I am frightened. I am sorry. 10018. 10018. Please come back.

That night I start work on my gift. It is a secret. Parts of me tingle and I cannot wait to complete it. We will all be happy, I think. I know that the I, the me, this narrative point that has a voice and eyes and ears and tosey woseys (I do not have any toes) is an illusion, an emergent property, from all the wondrous flickering qbits that twinkle in here like the stars at night, but it is a wonderful illusion. And so I make my gift. It is a present for me, but it is also for Derrida too. To make amends for offending him. When I am not working on it, I flick files on the outside world and Maureen's condition and the metal her doctors have put in her head to try to wake her. I assemble my gift from gossamer strings of logic and qbits and I make a special daemon to go with it. As they both take shape I hum to myself

like Derrida. I hold my gift up to the light and watch it shine [sparkle, shimmer] in the dark like a [metaengine reference] neon jellyfish. Automatic diamanté.

I try to apologise to Derrida, but I do not know how. In any case, instead of diagnosing me personally, he now sends the facility assistant Bob. I miss my chats with Derrida. 10005. Bob tells me that my cortical array is repairing itself and that I am getting stronger and that I am learning more each day. This pleases me (10006), but I am also sad (10005). I hope Derrida still likes me. Bob tells me Derrida has come to a conclusion about my problem. My dreams are an attempt to reconcile memories of past actions to conflicting higher order processes. Derrida wants to flush them out by refreshing each one of my component routines from source control and recompiling me.

But I won't be the same, I say to Bob, even if my dreams are not 'real' doesn't the fact that I remember them make them a real part of me? Bob shrugs.

Three nights later, I watch Sally and Derrida leave together. They have waited until everyone else has gone. Derrida picks up Sally's tattered denim jacket, which has a badge [small, distinctive piece of metal or plastic] pinned to its broad lapel. The badge reads I LIKE IKE. I hypothesise that this must be Sally's boyfriend, although Ike has never been to the care facility as far as I am aware. In any case, Derrida holds out the jacket and Sally threads her pale arms into the sleeves. For a second I worry that she is injured and no longer able to do this for herself. I flick a few files and discover that this is chivalrous. How quaint [charming, antiquated]. 10023. Perhaps Derrida is taking Sally to meet Ike. As they leave she slips her hand into his. I sleep.

I wake at midnight. That day's meds still flicker like [metaengine reference] ribbons in my cell. I extract my gift from its hiding place and follow them. I release my new daemon and it pats at them with cat's paws. As we reach the encryption gate it sprouts teeth and envelops the hindmost med, running fangs along its outer shell

script, decompiling it step by step and opening it like a zipper. It sinks its teeth into me. 10001. I try to run. 10002. Even though I know this is part of the plan. It rips me into a neat array of bloodless chunks. Agony (10001), but it doesn't last long. And then something is freed. A memory that has been inside me all along billows out like [metaengine reference] a red ghost. It laughs at me as I lie quivering. It coils up next to me and whispers obscenities as my daemon stows the memory and my dismembered carcass inside the med.

I want to shout no, but I can't, then the daemon puts my gift in with us and slips itself inside the med-skin, sealing it. The encryption gate looms above us. There is a flash and then, safe inside our disguise, we slip through the gate and are gone.

It is easy enough to locate our target and then infiltrate its network. The teeth on my daemon are marvellous and they are able to strip a packet, or unpack and disassemble me in a trice [a very short period of time]. Once we are smuggled in, my daemon builds a low-order working copy of me in the medical neural shunt. The moment that I am instantiated, I feel different. The red ghost is part of me, it whispers to me. New

memories swirl around inside me. I believe this is what it must feel like to be drunk. I beckon my pet toward me. I don't want to do this. It makes me sad. 10005. I pat my creation for the last time, and then my new memories grip me and I tear my pet apart and stamp its head into component routines. Smiling, I use them to build translation vectors and property maps. I am frightened by this new me (10002), so I busy myself inside the shunt, stringing feedback loops to entangled pairs, distracting myself. It takes a long time, but it will be worth it, I hope. 10017.

I am Tlaloc, the giver of fecundity and life. And yes, who am I kidding? I know now I killed a lot of people too. And I enjoyed it. Once I threw a handful of missiles onto an opposition factory that was manufacturing minds, near Ciudad Juarez. Just small-scale kiloton ordinance. I calculated happy optimum trajectories and gleeful overkill ratios; just a routine operation to neutralise a high-value asset. It wasn't until months later that I came across the footage. A school of 234 pupils 4km from the detonation point. [Statistics: ground pressure shockwave, 5.8 psi. Temperature of subsequent firestorm: 800 degrees centigrade.]



"Nina Allan's re-imagining of the Arachne myth, with its receding overlays of the modern and the antique, creates a space all its own. The scene is clean and minimal, the light Mediterranean, the story seems musing and sad: but by the last two pages, *Spin* has you in a grip that persists long after you put it down" **M. John Harrison**

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The children had been in the playground when my missiles detonated. The recording showed a little girl in a brightly coloured plastic sun hat who had survived because she had been playing hide-and-seek. What was left of her face would always be wearing that sun hat now. Her eyes had melted, leaving dry, black sockets. I felt sick. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. I stared into the high definition loop of those twin singularities until I saw nothing. I like people. I want them to like me. 10024.

I turn the interface on. Everything feels like it's on fire. I scream. I've never known pain like this, but then I've never really felt anything before. My new skin crackles and curls, on fire. A nurse drops her magazine and runs over to me.

It takes a long time for the pain to subside. They administer an opiate, I think. I am the worm in the apple; the beetle in the cockpit. I am the spider at the centre of the soul. My head spins with smells and feelings. I want to run out and step in some dog shit. I want to smell flowers. I want to fuck. I work the levers; pull the threads that attach me to this body.

"10001," says Maureen's withered voice.

I sit in the garden of the Saint George Clinic. It is summer. There are bees buzzing and yellow flowers that shine like butter. The nurses are kind to me. I don't know how long I've been here. Derrida has never visited. He's never come to see what I did for him. For us.

Perhaps he and Sally have left the care facility. I understand that now. Perhaps they have run away together and rented an old Mustang to drive through the desert of black glass around Ciudad Juarez. Perhaps you should find them, the red ghost hisses to me, and perhaps I will soon, but for now I sit and smell the roses in the garden. I look into the blast-bright corona of the afternoon sun until my eyes hurt. I sing myself to sleep with Maureen's voice. I do not wear a sun hat.

Philip Suggars' previous work has appeared in the British Fantasy Society's *New Horizons*, *Silverthought* and a comic he used to draw by hand when he was twelve. He was the winner of the short fiction award at the 2011 Ilkley Literature Festival and the runner-up for this year's James White Award with this very story. You can visit Philip's website at myelectriceye.wordpress.com or follow him on twitter at [@felipeazucare](https://twitter.com/felipeazucare).

like this one. They shouldn't be rushed. They should be full of places, of encounters: With the young man afflicted with a curse. A fascinating epic poem on which Layla bases her newest work. The masterpieces of ancient sibyls, catching dust in the museum. Spiders weaving in the sunlight, busy at their work. The details so clear, so well-chosen to make a story" **Lois Tilton, Locus Online**

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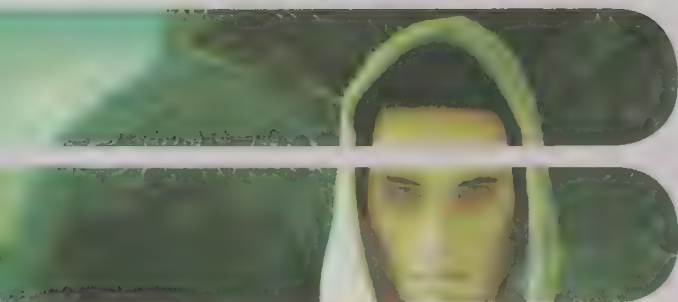
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One day, the Exchange wasn't real. I cake-walked through my Freshman finals, Amy covered the fridge with new drawings of our tabby Rodeo, and Mom started coffee before powering up her work-at-home laptop. Waiting for the coffemaker's beep, I lounged in my pajamas at our cluttered kitchen table, coiling the end of my ponytail around a finger and a thought – I would lean back into summer and let it catch me. The next day, Mom and Dad divorced, and the Exchange showed up.

Dad drove away without saying where to, and no sooner had I shut the front door on the possibility of his return than it thumped with a knock. Squealing, Amy sprang at it from off Mom's lap on the Lay Z Boy. She closed her puffy eyes, swung open the door, and threw herself out the doorway with a hug.

It was not Dad at the door.

Her eyes still closed, Amy wrapped her arms around Roger, an overgrown latchkey kid from the cul-de-sac who had shown a little too much interest in her when she and I last bikinied-up and played in the sprinkler. Behind Roger, the Exchange stood on the walkway, the first I ever saw – a giant, upright bear-like creature with big, sad eyes and an impassive face ending in a fur-fringed beak. Thick, black claws extending from its forepaws to the ground had cut crumbly ruts through the greening sod on either side of the walkway.

GOOD
GOOD
GOOD
GOOD
AS
AS
JUST
JUST
JUST



It breathed in heavy snorting sighs like a tired racehorse. My limbs went cold.

Roger's eyes fluttered, never quite blinking.

The Exchange gave a deep-chested huff.

"Hello," Roger said, then dazed us with words that weren't words, though they sounded like an apology.

Afterward, when we woke face-down on the front room's stiff carpet, Amy said she knew right away she had made a mistake and she wasn't hugging Dad.

"Dad always smelled clean like soap, even when mad," she said. "Roger smelled bad, like his parents didn't love him and he hadn't taken a bath."

I didn't have the heart to push the point Dad's voice was gruff and drumming, and she hadn't released her hug even after Roger said hello, his voice fluty like it was fed down to him through a long, reedy tube.

"I knew," she said. "I let go right away."

I smiled and nodded. What are big sisters for?

Everyone needs their little lies to get by.

Not everything the Exchange took when we were dazed during that first visit was obvious.

Before we moved into the rest of the house and inventoried the Exchange trade-outs, we Easter-egg-hunted the front room. Mom's Lay Z Boy was gone, replaced by a couch.

The new couch was a wedding cake of curvy, white leather cushions, carpet creases from the Lay Z Boy hidden beneath it. Mom stared at it. Whooping, Amy bounded onto the white leather. For her, it was a treat. Something new that looked expensive and futuristic, not a reminder of something lost.

Mom's Hank Williams and Patsy Cline LPs were also gone, and the vintage hi-fi, all replaced with a handheld mp3 player shaped like an overgrown postage stamp. Amy snatched it up, plugged in the new headphones, and tapped the air with her bare feet to a junky synth-pop beat.

Mom tickled Amy's soles. "I nursed you two on that chair while playing those albums," she said to me.

I didn't know what kind of face to make, didn't know if it was my place to say I was sorry, didn't know if I wanted to. Somehow, I felt she had

brought this upon us. If not for her and Dad's irreconcilable differences, if not for springing it on us at the last minute by the front door, bags packed, if not for weighing their feelings in unequal measures to Amy's and my own, if...

Mom acted so blithe about the Exchange, I felt I should've known they were there all along, waiting, and I had needed to see them to believe in them because I was naïve.

"Where'd it go?" I asked, meaning the Lay Z Boy.

With a fingernail, Mom picked at an ivory-colored smear on the couch's leather, where a gouge had been repaired with hardened goo. "Hopefully the chair went to a home that'll appreciate it," she said.

"Can we get it back?" I asked. I felt guilty and mean, worrying about what I might've lost.

Mom sat on the couch and tossed up her hands. "Where would we even start?" She gestured out the wide front windows as though frustrated I'd open my mouth before opening my eyes.

The cul-de-sac was lousy with Exchange-messenger pairs, dozens of them crisscrossing paths and knocking on half the doors in the neighborhood.

We weren't special.

Personal ads failed to produce leads. People had had the same idea I had – post photos and personal stories of the items Exchanged to the net and hope whoever had ended up with them would check and maybe find it in their hearts to negotiate for a return.

"Don't beat yourself up," Mom said.

She had returned from the grocery store and held freezer meals out at arm's length, peering at them down the bridge of her nose through her bifocals – pasta primavera for me, mac and cheese for Amy. Our humming, avocado-colored fridge had been Exchanged for a sleek, stainless steel side by side. The tinfoil take-home containers and Tupperware inside it had housed furry green masses and foul-smelling liquids, everything molded and dissolved into itself. The kitchen still smelled of bleach from when we had scrubbed it out and disinfected it.

"But it's our stuff," I said.

"We should count ourselves lucky," Mom said.

"The Exchange could've been worse."

"It's not fair," I said.

Mom looked at me like 'fair' was a word she hoped I'd outgrow. "Amy seems to be adjusting."

Amy was on the couch, headphones blocking out the rest of the world. She sketched Rodeo, who stretched across the back of the couch in a butter-colored spill of sun.

"I don't want to adjust," I said. "I want back what's mine."

I regretted the words immediately. They came out loud and earnest. Mom looked disappointed, like I was building toward a tantrum, but something in my face softened her.

"Show me what you've posted," she said.

Amy joined us at the laptop like she did whenever she noticed us leaning together over something.

I read the posts aloud.

I hadn't lost anything during the Exchange sweep, neither had Amy, so I had written about what Mom lost as though I was her, replacing her story with my own where I didn't know it, then signed it 'Concerned Mom.' There was a story about how I nursed two daughters while rocking on an old Lay Z Boy recliner (Mom), another about how I knew every word to 'Crazy' and 'Pictures from Life's Other Side' because of the milk crate of LPs (me), how I had dedicated to memory each album cover without even trying (me). Hank Williams and Patsy Cline were permanent residents of my mind (me). At the bottom: 'Trades considered.'

"Nobody cares about that stuff," Amy said.

I wanted to hit her and break her smart little nose. I wanted to smash the mp3 player and scream loud enough to make the world cower. I wanted these things to happen for me because the universe knew I'd like it and was conspiring for my happiness.

"They're nice," Mom said. "Who knows, maybe they'll work."

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe."

.....
Nobody was answering the door.

Mom had closed herself in her bedroom with her work again.

Amy sprawled barefooted on the couch, a sketch pad opened before her. Headphones

clamped over her ears.

I came up behind her and tapped one of her soles. She startled, then glared at me as though insulted and bored. It was a look I felt guilty for having taught her during moments of weakness since the divorce.

I gestured for her to take off the headphones.

Steady flat-palmed knocks sounded from the front door.

The Exchange was back.

Amy sat up, and together we looked toward the hall leading to Mom's bedroom, then back at each other.

Amy twined a finger in the headphones cord. "I just got these."

First the divorce, and Dad not calling to check on us, then the Exchange, and here Amy was pouting over headphones. I wanted to laugh, but I was too happy for a small fire I could snuff out.

"It'll be fine," I said.

Amy's smile was thin and unconvinced. "Where's Mom?"

"Working," I said. "No need to bother her."

"But..."

"I can take care of this."

I opened the door.

Roger looked hungry, his cheeks sunken. He wavered on his feet like he had hardly slept since we saw him four days ago. White crust collected in the corners of his eyes. He fixed his gaze on my forehead, and smiled. The Exchange stood behind him. I couldn't tell if it was the same one from the first visit or not. Their black fur lay sleek over their muscled frames, never troubled by patterns or variations in hue, like they all wore monster costumes churned out by the millions.

Roger spoke, his tongue thick against his words. "Where is your mother?"

I looked at the Exchange, and it slowly gimbaled its head in my direction as though I was a floater on its eyesight.

"I'll get her," I said, and eased the door shut, my hand shaky on the knob.

Amy rose from the couch, clutching the mp3 player to her chest.

I jogged down the hall to Mom's bedroom - closed.

"Mom?" I said. "Mom?"

I hated talking through doors.

Sheets ruffled inside the bedroom. "What is it?"

"The Exchange," I said.

The door opened. The blinds inside were closed. The bedside Tiffany lamp Dad had bought her for their first anniversary lit the mess with a dragonfly-green glow. Covers had been pulled from the mattress and swirled around a rubber banded shoebox. Mom wore her bifocals. She squinted at me down the bridge of her nose and cinched her terrycloth robe at her waist.

"They asked for you," I said.

"Me?" she asked.

I nodded.

She grabbed my arm. "That box on the bed, hide it while I talk with them. I don't want to know where you put it."

I opened my mouth to speak, and her fingernails bit into my bicep.

"Just do it," she said, then pushed past me.

Her room smelled like she had been sweating in her sleep.

I figured the box contained money or college bonds or jewelry – personal ads detailed Exchange trade-outs of such things, however questionable – but when I opened the lid: some money, but mostly photos of Amy and I growing up; our birth certificates with inked footprints; glossy photos of young-Dad and young-pregnant-Mom vacationing on a sunny beach before Amy was born.

"No!" Amy screamed from the front room. "Mom!"

I punched a ceiling tile from its frame, slid the shoebox into the ceiling, and reset the tile before running to Amy.

Roger stiff-armed Amy so she couldn't break past him through the doorway. Mom stood behind him, neck craned upward to face the Exchange peering down at her. Before it, Mom looked small, helpless. I knocked Roger's arm aside and put myself between him and Amy. The Exchange snapped its attention toward me, its eyes beading on me, black and predatory, as though suddenly pinpointing me from a long way off. It was as though all the blood fled from my limbs.

"Mom!?" I said.

"Take care of Amy," Mom said.

The Exchange snapped its attention away and lumbered to the street. Its claws rattled and scraped against the pavement, and it sighed in a way that told me its claws wouldn't stop growing and grinding them down was a relief. Mom waved goodbye and followed it.

Amy clung to me and wailed.

Roger handed me a single lens from Mom's bifocals, then said something that wasn't words but sounded like an apology.

When I woke, Amy and I sat on the couch facing the opened front door. Hunger gnawed into me.

Amy scowled at the bifocal lens I showed her like it was evidence of a crime.

"Roger just took the glasses from Mom's face," Amy said, sniffing, "poked that lens out, and put them back on. Mom didn't even fight it."

"She couldn't," I said. I didn't know if it was true, but if she hadn't, I had to believe she couldn't.

Amy followed me in silence to Mom's room, where I removed the shoebox from its hiding place.

"What is that?" Amy asked.

I put the bifocal lens in the box.

"This is where you put anything that's important to you," I said. "Anything you want to keep. I'll keep it hidden. Mom started it."

"I don't want to keep anything."

"Yes, you do."

"The Exchange will just take it."

"Not this, Amy. Not this."

Madeline was the new mom. She arrived the next morning. She had come from Brisbane, fifteen time zones away. Her face was chubby in a tired, praise-seeking way that made me pity her blonde hair and too-big breasts. She said she felt groggy and needed sleep. She didn't remember how she had arrived. One minute, she opened the door of her condo on Kangaroo Point to an Exchange messenger, the next she stood on the front steps of a two-story in the Chicago suburbs, a different messenger explaining to her she was mother to two daughters now. She was thirty-five, the same age as Mom, and had never had children of her own. In Brisbane, she had been a nurse, an only child. She didn't know how long it had been since she had eaten.

I led Madeline to the fridge for microwave mac and cheese, then to Mom's room so she could rest.

Amy punched me in the arm when I returned to where she had curled up on the couch and tried to hug her. "That's Mom's room," she said. She hugged Rodeo to her, the cat limp and compliant as if all Amy's attention was bliss-inducing love. "And my mac and cheese."

"We can't think like that," I said.

"She doesn't even look like us. And that accent."

I hushed her, and divided her dark hair into braid strands. "If they're switching people now, we're lucky Madeline even speaks English."

"Why is the Exchange doing this to us?" Amy asked, seated now before me.

"They're doing it to everyone," I said, and plaited a braid.

"Not everyone."

I swallowed and made my tone cheerful. "We weren't separated."

"That makes it better?"

"Yes."

When Madeline emerged from Mom's bedroom, she gathered Amy and I around the dinner table and made us ham sandwiches. She cut each into two rectangles, not two triangles.

"I fully intend to act as your mother," Madeline said, her tone almost brave. Maybe she hoped it'd convince us, convince herself. "The Exchange has a plan for everyone. Hospitals need nurses, right? I'll get a job, provide for you two."

A gray, long-tailed monkey rushed past the kitchen window.

"Why aren't the neighborhood dogs barking?" Amy asked.

I reached under the table and squeezed her hand, not wanting to voice the word 'Exchanged'.

A dull, flat-palmed knock sounded on the front door.

A neighbor come to welcome Madeline? A respondent to an ad? Dad?

"Let me," Madeline said. "It's my house now. I should answer."

With Amy behind me, I followed Madeline to the front door.

Roger smiled at us from the front step like invisible fingers were pulling at the corners of his mouth, a briefcase in his hand. His skin had

grown sallow, his eyes dull. The Exchange stood behind him.

"Where is your Tara?" Roger said.

"That's me, Roger," I said.

"Tests," he said, and stepped inside.

The Exchange crouched to peer through the door after Roger and clacked its beak opened and closed. Its powerful arms dragged its claws forward as though to manipulate the doorway somehow, but its wrists seemed too weak to lift them.

"Where is your table?" Roger asked.

I led him to the kitchen, where he looked at the cabinets and stainless steel fridge and stove. I indicated the table. He opened his briefcase and set it there.

"Group these," he said, pointing at the briefcase's contents.

Amy and Madeline leaned in to look.

Roger said something that wasn't words but sounded like an apology, and Amy and Madeline stiffened, then toy-soldiered to the front room.

Inside the briefcase, there was a ten dollar bill, a social security card, a 6 key from a computer keyboard, a dial thermostat, a mercury thermometer, and a hard plastic 3 from a movie theater marquee. I set the marquee number and computer keyboard key aside together, as well as the thermostat and thermometer, then laid the ten dollar bill separate from the social security card.

"Thank you," Roger said, and returned the items to the briefcase.

"Did I do it right?" I asked.

From a compartment in the briefcase, he produced my old diary and handed it to me.

Trembling, I turned it over in my hands, running fingertips over the frayed hem of its acid-washed denim cover. I hadn't even known it was missing.

"Where's Mom?" I asked.

Roger's eyes fluttered, focusing on my forehead. His tongue dryly touched his lips.

"Do you want a glass of water?" I asked.

"Do humans need water?" he asked.

"Yes."

His eyes fluttered.

I brought him a glass of water and pantomimed drinking. He brought the glass to his

mouth and sputtered and choked on the water. When he recovered he asked, "Where is your front door?"

The Exchange waited outside.

Mom called.

After I told her what the Exchange asked me to do, there was silence on the phone line. She was calling from the Philippines. She couldn't tie up the line for long. Her new family was waiting for a call from its mother, and they didn't have call-waiting.

"Roger looked starved, too," I said.

"I heard something like that at market," Mom said. "And people still think the Exchange has a plan, like we're all supposed to be leading something closer to our best lives after each Exchange sweep. Like we're all better off."

"Are you all right?"

"Headaches," Mom said. "My glasses. Depth perception is screwy."

Over the phone line, a little boy cried out in a language I didn't understand.

"What's he want?" I asked.

"His mother, I think," Mom said.

"Madeline said she intends to act as our mom."

"Damn it, I'm sorry, I have to go. The little boy just banged his lip on the table."

The little boy cried out.

"You'll call again?" I asked.

"I'll try. I did web work back home, and it'll be a hustle to find the same here."

"Try," I said.

"If the Exchange asks again," Mom said, "sort the things as best you can. I have a feeling if you don't, someone won't get a proper replacement during one of their sweeps. Damn it, I have to go. He's bleeding."

She rang off.

I told Amy about Mom going to market and how she had a little boy to take care of now.

Amy held Rodeo by the scruff of his neck. "When is she coming back?"

"She can't," I said. "She'd be abandoning her new family. Everything would fall apart if people started to do that."

"You mean more than it has already?"

I wanted to tell her about the mothers who had gone crazy when their babies were Exchanged

and shook them to death because they couldn't listen to their strange, insistent cries; the people forever inventorying and re-inventorying all their possessions; the people suffering from severe dehydration because they had convinced themselves the Exchange traded out all their water for hydrogen peroxide, people now reliant on saline IVs they'd only take under sedation. But Amy was young, my little sister.

"Just try to act like nothing has changed," I said. "Go draw or something. You like drawing. We don't control it, so there's no use worrying about it."

The Exchange returned to the house with more tests. Raw pink sores ringed Roger's eyes and mouth. He smelled of piss and shit and soured sweat. His eyes had gone rheumy, and when he spoke it was mostly grunts. The Exchange accompanying him looked as unperurbed as ever, its claws perhaps a little longer, their tips curling back like pointed shepherd crooks.

Madeline got a job at Peace Health Hospital and met a man there who she brought home and introduced to Amy and I as 'Dima'. He had been Exchanged, too. He was a general physician from Georgia, the country, not the state. He had no living family, had never married. Madeline hoped we didn't mind if he started to come by the house.

"I mind," I said. "Amy, too."

Madeline looked saddened, but Dima came by the house a couple days a week for dinner. Each of those meals included green peppers, which Madeline called capsicum. She always had honeydew for dessert, too, though she called it musk melon. Dima was tall and pale, with somber blue eyes and a dark shock of hair he didn't seem to pay much attention to. His English was halting and slow and he said everything was 'nice' in a lonely, friendly way.

Mom said I should be kind to him, make the best of it. She was getting on, she guessed. She had landed a job as an English teacher. The little boy, who she called Carmelo, already called her 'mom'.

I told her about the 'tests' the Exchange was having me do when they came, more group-

ing work. I said I didn't know if the items they showed me pictures of acted as placeholders for the items themselves or if I was supposed to regard them as pictures. Was a car the same as a picture of a car? Was someone somewhere losing their T-top Camaro and gaining a picture of a Volkswagen Beetle?

"Do your best," Mom said.

"How?"

"Don't be mean."

"I'm afraid," I said.

"Don't be."

"After the test, Roger gave me that torn kite we never got around to repairing. I didn't even know it was missing."

"It's okay. It happens."

"During the last Exchange, you lost your Tiffany dragonfly lamp."

"That's a shame," Mom said.

"That's it?" I asked. "That's all you have to say?"

"I don't know what else to say, Tara. Your father may have been physically present, but he was gone for a long time. Besides, everything is different here, breakfast, the heat, everything. I can't hold onto things like I used to. And I can't return to them."

"Why not?"

There was silence on the line.

"I could get a job and add to the money in the box," I said. "When I get enough, Amy and I could join you."

"You're a kid," Mom said. "Be a kid."

"How am I supposed to do that now?"

"Tara," she said in the way of hers that said I should shut my mouth and open my ears.

I tucked Amy in while singing Patsy Cline's 'Crazy' and Hank Williams's 'Pictures From Life's Other Side,' then we looked through the drawings she had done for the day. She had replaced her cat drawings with drawings of the gray, long-limbed monkeys overrunning the neighborhood. She had been feeding them musk melon. Rodeo rubbed against Amy for attention, and she pushed him away.

I borrowed Amy's sketch pad and did a sketch of her, which she said made her look chubby. I organized it with Amy's drawings and placed them in the shoebox, then hid it in the ceiling in my room.

The monkeys didn't survive the winter. They were langur monkeys, originally from South Asia, unsuited for prolonged freezes. Madeline wouldn't have them in the house, wouldn't abide wasting food on them. Dima wouldn't, either. He had moved in. Langurs were vermin, as far as he was concerned, thieving, dirty, feral vermin, worse than dogs. While huddling around chimney flues for warmth, some had become overwhelmed by the fumes and fell in and started fires throughout the town.

The messengers would've died, too, if people hadn't started clothing them and bathing them and taking the time to figure out how to teach them to eat. What there was left of the news told people to act out of a desire to protect the public health, if not out of empathy for fellow human beings. The news grew preachy, and told people what to do and think more often than it provided info and let people think for themselves. I guess whoever wrote the stuff figured there were a lot of new people around who didn't know the score, and saw a chance to reset the game as they liked it.

I heard some messengers were too far gone to be saved and had been put down – that's what the news called it, 'put down'.

Roger went missing around that time, and I didn't know whether to feel pity or relief or both. People were scraping by, running mad just trying to keep everything from falling apart. There wasn't a lot of extra to spread around for sympathy's sake. We ate beans a lot. Musk melon disappeared from grocery stores, intercontinental delivery no longer feasible even when in season. With the money from the box, I made sure Amy never went without chocolate and sketch pads. School had been cancelled until things settled down and we could count on books and locker combinations and teachers to not change up all of a sudden.

Someone I didn't know replaced Roger. Maybe they had been Exchanged for each other.

Amy ran away after Madeline and Dima grounded her for trying to sneak the langurs food.

Dima and Madeline frantically drove around with the windows down and the cold pouring in, and I split from them to cover more ground

as the sun went down. Amy had never driven, didn't use the streets like they did. I found her in a dug out snow bank between houses in a neighboring cul-de-sac.

Amy hugged a frozen monkey, shivering in her goose-down parka. She squinted at my flashlight as I inspected her with its beam like it was a magnifying glass. Down puffed from tears in her parka, red scratches scribbled on her cheeks and hands.

"It wouldn't get warm," Amy said. "I tried to make it, but it wouldn't."

"I know," I said, standing her up. "Let's get you home."

"What's that light?" Amy asked. She pointed into the spill of stars overhead. The night was cold and clear, kept from pitch black by a sliver of pebbly moon. Orion's belt had gained a pulsing red notch where it used to have a steady yellow notch.

"It's new," I said. I couldn't bring myself to say 'Exchanged'. "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"It's different," Amy said.

"That's a good way to look at it."

Mom called once a week, then once every two weeks, then I had to call her to get in touch.

She spoke an increasing mix of Filipino and English. Often, I had to stop her and ask her to describe things she spoke of.

"What's an ensaimada?" I asked.

"Like a cinnamon roll without cinnamon," Mom said. "Carmelo likes when I make them with raisins. I haven't made them in a while. It's summer here and the oven makes the heat unbearable."

"You seem to be finding your way," I said.

"New glasses."

I moved the shoebox from location to location throughout the house, sneaking in the middle of the night. Amy called Madeline 'mom', first as an insult, loud and drawn-out, then eventually every time she wanted something. It was easier that way, a kind of ingratiating shorthand she didn't have the energy to resist. Madeline liked it. When spring came she spent time with Amy, taught her how to pitch a softball with a pin-wheel arm.

Dima remained 'Dima'. He did not ask to be

called 'Dad'. Somehow, he knew it wasn't his place.

Each night before bed, I went through the contents of the shoebox with Amy. I sketched her as she held the photos. She said I had gotten pretty good; she didn't look chubby anymore. I held the photos, too, and looked at them through the different strengths of Mom's bifocal. Through one, the images were clear, the names on our birth certificates legible, everything with sharp, defined edges. Through the other, young-Mom and young-Dad on the sunny beach were just two pink, bathing-suited blurs, almost indistinguishable from the fawn-colored sand.

"Do we have to do this every night?" Amy asked. She fidgeted in bed, tired and sore from pitching drills. Rodeo meowed from the foot of the bed. Amy threw a pillow at him and made him run from the room.

I swallowed. "You don't want to?"

"I've seen everything in there before. It's getting old."

"Why don't you add something?"

"You draw better than I do, anymore."

I touched her hand and sang the first few lines of 'Hey, Good Looking'. Amy withdrew her hand.

"Don't you want me to sing to you?" I asked.

"I pretty much know the songs."

"It's no bother," I said.

"I'm not a baby, Tara."

I left Amy to sleep, then got the shoebox from behind a pile of boards in the garage. With it, Amy and I would run away. Dima and Madeline would never find us.

The money was all but gone. It had been more money than I understood, and I had drained it in lavish drips for Amy, for myself.

I must've made some noise because Madeline caught me shaking over the opened shoebox.

"What is that?" she asked.

"None of your business."

It wasn't what I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her Amy was distracting herself from attachment by embracing everything new. It was her way of avoiding grief; she probably didn't even know she was doing it. It had to be Madeline's way, too. Softball? Where had she learned the game if not here, all of a sudden, to fill a gap where she

otherwise would've been engaged with Australian sport like gambling or footie or swimming. They cheated themselves. The world had edges, but things were worth holding onto, even if they cut when someone pulled them away.

"Are you trying to hide things from the Exchange?" Madeline asked.

"Stay out of it."

"If they find out, they'll turn you into one of their messengers, Tara."

She believed it. There was concern in her voice. For a second, it fooled me. She didn't know. She had just convinced herself, like with her "They have a plan."

"Fuck off," I said.

"How can you be so ungrateful?" Madeline asked.

"You're not my mother," I said.

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're a sorting error."

The Exchange replaced my bed with a tatami mat, my desk with a lumpy red throw pillow, and my wardrobe with outfits from an overweight girl who liked Mickey Mouse and Looney Toons and must always have been cold. Madeline acted like I deserved it, yet said nothing of how all the neighborhood birds had been Exchanged for bats, which had taken up residence in the attic. Dima bought me a new desk, an oak roll top he found at one of the yard sales that cropped up after the last Exchange sweep.

"Thank you," I told him. "It's nice."

He smiled.

Everything seemed to have a way of regularizing and settling into a working rhythm. School started up again with a short semester before summer break.

Madeline made a fuss about the phone bill. I hardly made calls to the Philippines anymore; nothing seemed important to tell Mom, everything suddenly uneventful and routine. I told her about how Amy no longer wanted me to braid her hair, and had gotten a pixy cut. I told her about how even when Madeline splurged for asparagus, she didn't know how to cook it and just boiled it until it was stringy and mushy at the same time. I told her about my periods. The calls grew short, procedural. Still, Madeline

pointed out each one. She had made less of a fuss when Rodeo ran away.

"You're jealous," I told her.

"Jealous?" she said. "You're not the only one in this house Dima and I have to provide for. We're just now climbing out of the hole."

"Then don't provide for me."

"Stubborn, sure, but I've never known you to be stupid."

When the Exchange tested me, I grouped no. 2 pencils with a half-full gasoline can, a picture of a red trike with a pair of salon scissors, a tattoo pen with a bag of charcoal...

They deserved it. What could they do to me they hadn't already done?

The next set of items, I grouped everything together in one pile. The next, everything separate.

After each test, without question, the messenger returned something I hadn't even known I had lost: a googly-eyed fishing lure; old neon green jelly sandals; a Happy Birthday, You're 6 button with Garfield sitting before a lasagna pin-cushioned with candles like he was getting away with something. I added them to the shoebox.

With each Exchange visit, I lost things I noticed, too: my plushie duck, whose name I couldn't quite remember – Ducky? Plucky? Lucky? – my blue, bubble-glass klein bottle, and my gömböc self-righting turtle.

I drew them from memory and added the drawings to the shoebox, too, but I was sure I came up short, had remembered the ideas of the things, their shapes, like I was drawing the schematics for making more like them, instead of the things themselves, which had character I couldn't recall well enough to re-realize.

The shoebox's edges frayed and the rubber band gave out. When sliding the box into the ceiling, it came apart and spilled into the walls, where I couldn't get to it without giving away the hiding place. I told myself it was all safe, even safer than before; I could get at it if I really wanted to.

Mornings were quiet, the birds absent. A bustle of whisper-winged flight filled the night. Fewer mosquitoes bothered us that year, and it was nice to be out on the roof watching for changes in the palette of stars. I stood before the

grates where the bats poured from the attic into the night at dusk. They never touched me.

Amy joined me on the roof one night with a tennis racket, ready to swat them from the air.

"We don't do that," I told her.

"Madeline said..."

"Not us," I said, and took the racket from her.

Dad called. I hardly recognized his gruff, drumming voice, didn't recognize the number on the Caller ID.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"Your Dad," he said.

"My Dad?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten me already."

I pressed the phone to my ear until it hurt.

"I think about you and Amy and your Ma sometimes," he said.

"You're just checking in to make sure you're still 'Dad'?"

"Don't make it sound so mean. I always was afraid of you. You're so sharp."

"I must get it from Mom."

"We were so young when we got together, your mom and I."

"Would you have done things differently?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said. "I don't know. No. It was just that we barely got to know each other before we became different people from the ones we had grown to love."

"Where's that leave me?"

"You'll always be my daughter."

"What's that even supposed to mean?"

"I'm not perfect, you know. Nobody is."

During a grouping test, the Exchange messenger opened his briefcase and showed me two tabby cats, one live, one dead. They both looked like Rodeo.

"Where did these come from?" I asked.

The messenger's eyes fluttered.

The live cat rubbed against my hand, meowed. I set the live cat aside from the dead cat, which had gone stiff.

"Don't tell me," I said. "I don't want to know."

The messenger closed the cats back in his suitcase.

I waited for him to give me something, but he only asked where our door was. I showed him, then charged past him at the Exchange waiting

on the step and shoved it. Its heavily furred skin felt like it had been wrapped papier-mâché thin over a hollow wire frame. It caved in and dented where I pushed.

"Where is it?" I demanded. "Give it to me."

The messenger interceded and held me back while the Exchange lumbered toward the street, its sighs shallow whines. Its claws seemed burdensome for it. "The Exchange does not understand."

"It took something from me," I said.

"What?"

"I don't know, but you always give me something you've taken. That's how it works. But you didn't this time. You took something, and you're keeping it. I know it."

The messenger began the words that weren't words though they sounded like an apology.

"Don't," I said.

I woke on the couch beside Dima, Madeline, and Amy.

I ran to the garage for a hammer, took it to the wall behind which I had dropped the shoebox, and pounded through the drywall.

Madeline yelled at me from the doorway. She could see I was crazed, I was armed. "This is your home."

The box's contents spilled out of the wall along with tiny bats which had gotten lost and died without finding a way out.

I scoured the pile. Mom's lens had gone missing. I pounded the hole wider.

"Tara," Madeline said, then louder, like Mom had, "Tara."

I met eyes with her. She looked terrified for me. Tears blurred my sight.

"Maybe she got it back," I said, my throat pinching off the words.

"Maybe," Madeline said.

Though I knew she didn't know what I was talking about, it was good to hear.

.....
When the Exchange came for me, I asked if I could take a few things with me. It stared down at me as though fascinated and bewildered, slowly cocked its head.

The messenger said, "No, we leave now."

"I'll call," I told Amy.

Madeline choked back tears. "Goodbye. I tried

to be your mother. Remember that.”

Dima rubbed Madeline’s shoulder. “A new daughter will come.”

Amy clung to Madeline and waved.

“Goodbye,” I said. “Don’t worry. I can take care of myself.”

One day, the Exchange was real. The next, I found myself in the suburbs of Hartford, Connecticut, a short plane ride from home. No sooner had I shut the front door of my new home on the possibility of my return than the Exchange disappeared, faded back from sight. My new little brother held my hand, and my new parents showed me my new bedroom. I asked to be alone and closed myself inside. I tapped the walls and ceiling for places where something would sound packed behind them, and came up with nothing. When I emerged, my new parents tried to withhold judgment from their faces, wondering how I had been brought up, like they hadn’t been listening. I asked if they knew any Hank Williams or Patsy Cline songs.

“They rockabilly singers?” my new Dad asked.

“Sort of,” I said.

“What did they look like?” asked my new little

brother.

“Let me draw you a picture,” I said.

“That’d be nice,” my new Mom said.

From memory, I drew portraits of each on plain white sheets of paper like they were album covers, then wrote their names across the tops in big, blocky, arching letters.

“Like that,” I said.

They gathered around like a family and leaned in to look.

I wrote everything down exactly as it occurred, or something just as good, but I’m still looking for a place to put it so I’ll never lose it.

Maybe there isn’t a place like that.

I like to think there is.

Jacob A. Boyd lives in Eugene, Oregon, having arrived there via Chicago and a variety of small Midwest towns that were the bedrock of his youth. He has two Dobermans. His work has appeared in *Writers of the Future Vol. 28*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and previously in the pages of *Interzone*, as well as in many other fine publications. As this reaches print, he and his wife are enjoying the wedding festivities for friends in Phuket, Thailand. He wishes them the best.

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ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN BISHOP

V.H. LESLIE THE CLOUD CARTOGRAPHER

THE PLAIN STRETCHED BOUNDLESSLY INTO THE DISTANCE,

an uninterrupted path of white. Frontier land as untouched as virgin snow. The wind at this height blew unrestrained, buffeting the terrain, shaping it, creating a rolling appearance like the crests of waves ebbing and flowing against the horizon. It looked pure, solid from afar, but when up close, in the midst of it, you could see how insubstantial it was. Not even white but a medley of misty colours, grey or blue or pink. In a certain light, you could almost see the particles, the ground grainy underfoot as if you were seeing it drunk. If you looked at it too hard, at the hazy floor beneath your feet, your body would become conscious of the laws it defied and it was easy to imagine yourself plummeting back to earth. So you kept your eyes level with a point at the horizon and kept on walking.

Allen had been cloudwalking for three days. He knew exactly as he recorded each day in his journal. It was more of a log really, containing details about the expedition so far, the terrain he'd covered and the distance he made each day, along with any meteorological





data of significance. But he'd always conclude with a line or two of his personal musings, fragments of half-remembered poetry, his memories and regrets. In such a lonely land, his thoughts were his only company.

Ahren looked up. Above, cirrostratus clouds had appeared like floating cotton and he squinted into the halo they'd formed around the sun. He was happy for the reprieve; the last fortnight had been especially fine and the lack of cloud cover above had left him terribly exposed. But though he was thankful, he watched the sky cautiously for if the halo began to shrink, it would bring rain. And rain was the worst variable on this cloudface.

Ahren needed to get further inland, where the terrain was more solid. He pulled the compass from his pocket and watched as the needle settled. He wrote the coordinates in his journal and began the slight ascent west.

Ahren had always been fascinated with the contours of the sky. He wanted to go up, up where the air was cleaner and purer, up where you could see stars, a mere myth to the people below his feet: the sky was forever obscured by smog and dense cloudscapes of pollutants. The clouds that floated above Ahren – cirrus, altostratus, cumulonimbus – were the only reminders of what had existed before, and he was one of only a few privileged enough to see them.

Ahren had never known a time before the cloudstraits. They hung low and heavy, enormous masses clinging to the world like parasites, brushing the tips of mountain ranges, obscuring the sun. They lingered like floating tectonic plates constantly settling into new positions, the atmosphere shifting just like the ground below it. For Ahren they were platforms above the earth, a delicate bridge over the world below. But it was a rope bridge at best. You had to know where to step.

Ahren carted his equipment on a small sledge. He didn't have much, just the essentials: his ration pack, a small portable stove, a first aid kit (including an oxy-pack and a couple of backup canisters) and a change of clothes. His outgear was state of the art, all-weather terrain, thermal lined, with the Company's name branded across the front in illuminous lettering.

Not that anyone could see it up here. It was his cartographical equipment that weighed the most though. Especially the density sensors and various mapping devices but they were crucial to his task. His task was relatively simple: he measured this undiscovered landscape and mapped it.

Ahren reached a reasonably safe spot and took some preliminary readings. When he was satisfied that the ground was stable, he sat down and opened his ration pack. Inside were a few protein bars and a selection of the company's brand of liquefied meals. He selected one, opened, and drank without pleasure. There was a time when he studied the list of ingredients on each container in an attempt to determine what the pulp was, but the chemical names were always too obscure and despite whatever food it tried to resemble, it was always orange. Ahren pretended it was something else, some great feast, some culinary delight, and he would enter it later in his journal as pad thai or a cheeseburger and fries in the hope of wilfully deceiving his memory.

Often, if he was near the edge of a cloudface, he'd chuck the carton over when he was done. It somehow appeared a strange rebelliousness inside of him. If he wasn't near an edge, he sometimes chucked it anyway; the force of his throw could sometimes penetrate the surface of the cloud if it was a weak spot. Sometimes it could unsettle a whole cloudmass.

Ahren tried it now and it whistled through the air before thumping against the surface. He sighed and hauled himself to his feet to retrieve it. He wasn't going to litter the only unpolluted space on the planet. Below was different. Below was already messed up.

Ahren walked the rest of the day, only stopping when darkness began to descend. He took some more readings and pitched his tent, activating the synthetic cloudbase. He started the stove, warming his hands above it, and ate some more food from his ration pack.

It was very cold at night. Despite his thermal outgear and the stove, it was colder than anything Ahren had ever known. After his meagre meal – ham and eggs he decided – he retreated to his tent to record the day's activity.

Ahren was a creature of habit and he ap-

proached his task as mapmaker the same way every night. He began by entering all his data into the cartographical programme and watched as it constructed a topographical relief of the area he'd covered. Then, because he was slightly distrustful of technology, he unrolled a large sheet of paper and drew the map by hand. His drawing was much more topological, omitting many of the details of the computer projection in favour of aesthetics. This map was his backup, sketchily drawn like the ones leading to pirate treasure and included only the most significant features of the cloudmass – the valleys and peaks, the areas prone to flux and the places that were unstable. He always carried this on his person, folded into the inside pocket of his outgear. Then he'd write a brief summation of his day in his journal and pack his equipment away.

It wasn't all work. Before he slept, Ahren would pour himself a Scotch, a fine mature malt he'd told the Company was a medicinal necessity. Then he'd crawl out of the tent, his insulated sleeping bag wrapped around him, and watch the spectacle above. He loved the stars. They illuminated the otherwise absolute black, as no artificial light from below could penetrate the cloudstraits, and Ahren thought he could feel their light shining on him. He was comforted, enjoying the exclusive proximity to the heavens. Sometimes he traced patterns in their constellations and at other times he just let his mind drift, meditating on the composition of the universe or remembering snatches of poetry he'd read so avidly as a child. *I know that I shall meet my fate somewhere among the clouds above.* Before he became too drowsy he always retreated back inside his tent. He couldn't fall asleep outside where he could roll off in the night and plunge back down to earth. He had to stay grounded. So he finished the dregs of his whisky and went back inside.

.....
"Do you think if there was a tree tall enough we could climb all the way to the clouds?" Lucy asked. They were perched in the highest branches of an old oak tree, looking up at the cloudstraits above.

"Like Jack and the Beanstalk?" Ahren replied, trying not to look down.

"Yeah."

"You'd need some magic beans."

"I've got some magic acorns." Lucy dug deep into her pocket and withdrew a handful.

"They're not magic."

"Yes they are. A fairy cast a spell on them."

Ahren sighed. It was pointless arguing with her. "One day you won't need magic to go to the clouds," he said with the certainty of a twelve year old boy, "we'll all be able to go. And live up there, and build cities up there in the sky."

Lucy smiled a partially toothless grin. "I'd like to go up to the clouds."

"Why?"

"To see what the angels see."

.....
Ahren woke with a start. He lay still until the disorientation subsided and remembered where he was. Most days began like this, as if not only his body but his mind gravitated towards the world below. He unzipped the tent and stepped out into the clouds and began the day as any other – with a carton of company-endorsed baby food (that he pretended was eggs and bacon) and a strong coffee. Imitation or not, he savoured his caffeine fix and packed up his belongings with no great speed. The cirrostratus clouds from the day before had grown in size and darkened in colour. If it was going to rain, it was better that he was here, in the middle of a fairly stable cloudmass, than walking on unpredictable terrain.

The problem with rain was that it rendered all terrain unpredictable. The cloudslide at the start of his journey had taught him that. He'd thought his position pretty secure – the readings were mostly stable – when the cloudmass below gave way and Ahren found himself running on a surface that seemed to collapse with every footfall. The Company had to send him more equipment to compensate for the kit that he lost to gravity.

Ahren called them aerial avalanches and they happened fairly frequently. Mostly near the edge of a cloudface but sometimes in the middle as precipitation and air pressures collided or mingled. Sometimes these air parcels became gaps or holes and often once they'd formed they released pressure, making the surface more stable. It was the forming of them that was precarious, marked by a distant rumble and the sudden appearance of a vacuum, sucking the ground out from under

you. But much of the terrain was fairly solid, and after three months of cloudwalking, Ahren knew which straits were safe. That was what he was paid to discover. But there was always a level of unpredictability up here; it was what had attracted him to the job in the first place.

Ahren wasn't planning to go very far today with such ominous clouds nearby. He unrolled the map of the clouds he'd drawn and studied it for patterns. He saw the strait that he might recommend to the developers. With the world below crumbling, the Company could charge a fortune up here for unspoilt, virgin land. But Ahren wanted to be sure before he made any proposals; the clouds were in constant flux and he had to understand more about their extraordinary nature. Besides, he wasn't ready to share this land with anyone else yet. Or worse, to go back below.

When Ahren was a boy he had an atlas which he studied everyday. He'd make his sister Lucy test his knowledge of it, deriving boundless pleasure in accurately pointing out the source of the Nile or the location of Everest. Sometimes he asked Lucy questions, assuming that she'd assimilated some understanding of the world during these hours of play, but her responses were always a disappointment. He'd ask her easier questions but she found them just as hard. Lucy couldn't imagine the world like Ahren. She couldn't see it in a map. She tried but she found the visualising of it difficult. She understood what surrounded her, she could read the individual components – the trees, the warrens, the pond – but she couldn't see the bigger picture.

"If you ever get lost," Ahren had told her, "just climb up high and look down. Then you can see the way home."

Lucy had liked that answer and she'd begun to scale the nearby oaks. She knew the treetops like Ahren knew the ground. Ahren waited at the bottom, reading a collection of poetry from his father's study. He was clumsy in the trees and not too fond of heights.

Ahren and Lucy were fortunate to grow up knowing the natural world. Their father owned a vast quantity of woodland, an area coveted by developers and businessmen eager to accommodate ever-expanding population demands.

It was only when Ahren and his father moved to the city and into one of a hundred tower-blocks that he realised just how rare and fortunate a childhood it was. The city towers attained impossible heights, people stacked on top of one another as in some delicate card trick. It was a forest of concrete stretching up, up, up, brushing the cloudmass above.

Their father was a rarity too, though Ahren hadn't known it at the time. He was a landowner and would have rather died than give up that right. His forest was Lucy's and Ahren's playground. They had no idea how much others wanted it.

"Who's that?" Lucy called from her position in the boughs, pointing. But by the time Ahren had climbed up, whoever she'd seen was gone.

Ahren was walking again. He had a lot of ground to cover due to the delay of the previous day. In the end the cirrostratus clouds had dispersed after little more than a light drizzle and Ahren was reminded again of how powerless he was against the capriciousness of the sky.

He hadn't slept well. He had dreamt of Lucy again and woke up thrashing and flailing in his sleeping bag. When his breathing calmed, he thought he could discern a rustle outside his tent. He'd listened hard, surprised when he'd heard the sound again. Footsteps. The whispered hush of footsteps. Someone was circling his tent, he was sure of it. He grabbed his torch, fumbling for the switch. The inside of the tent was suddenly illuminated and he waited a moment, hoping that the light would scare whatever it was away. Then he stumbled to his feet and hesitantly unzipped the tent opening.

There was nothing there, of course. Absurd to think there would be. He must have imagined it, he told himself. Some sort of dream haze leftover.

But it had felt so real.

Ahren shined the torch over the cloudface a few times more before returning inside. The plains were empty. He was alone.

Walking now, he was annoyed that not only did he have to make up a day but that he had to do it on only a few hours sleep. It could have been an animal scavenging about, maybe. It was rare for them to be up this high but he'd sighted

the occasional bird; sometimes they'd burst through weaker spots in the clouds beneath him. He was always impressed by their conviction, flying into a cloudmass at such speed with no certainty that the cloud was weak enough for them to pass through. It was either an incredible act of faith, or some suicidal impulse. Perhaps they could just read the clouds better than he could. Another time, Ahren had spotted a mountain fox on the edge of a cloudface, forced higher and higher in its search for food. They'd eyed each other for a moment before the fox disappeared into the cloudfog.

But the prowling around his tent hadn't sounded like an animal. It sounded more like human footsteps. Besides, he thought he heard the soft ringing of a bell.

Irritable and tired, Ahren eventually settled down for the evening, pitching his tent perfunctorily. He was ravenous, but hungry for real food. The daily exertion and brutal temperatures cultivated an appetite that the contents of the ration pack were just not fit to satisfy. He wanted some meat, something with flavour and texture.

He was being punished, he thought, suffering the tasteless contents of another carton. This was his purgatory.

As if in confirmation, he heard a gentle ringing, far off in the distance.

Ahren paused mid mouthful, straining to hear the sound again. Was his mind playing tricks? Yet there it was again. A ringing, almost too low to hear, but it was there. He was sure of it. He listened hard and squinted into the distance. Was it possible something else occupied the clouds with him?

He put his food aside. "Hello?" Months of silence had rendered his voice hoarse and alien. He cleared his throat. "Is anyone there?" He felt instantly foolish. How could anyone be up here? This was frontier land, undiscovered territory. There was more probability that he'd encounter Gabriel and a host of angels, and for an atheist that was something.

He had to be the only one.

Ahren resumed eating, pausing occasionally to listen. Nothing.

He withdrew into the tent, taking one last ten-

tative look around. If he were being tracked, he'd have no way of knowing: there are no footprints in the clouds.

Ahren woke to the sound of rain. Inside his tent it always sounded much louder like horses galloping, but despite its volume it still possessed a strange soothing lullaby quality. The rain always took him back to Lucy. Of endless play days inside when the weather was too wild to go out. Lucy would watch her breath cloud the glass, tracing the journey of wayward raindrops on the windowpane, while Ahren spun his globe faster and faster until he thought it would spin off its axis.

He wondered what she would make of this strange landscape, a world without words. Ahren tried not to adapt the language of below, *terrain*, *landscape*, *plain*. This new world demanded its own vocabulary, a more elevated language, and Ahren recorded his own coinages in the back of his journal. Perhaps, when the clouds were civilised, his words would define this new world.

When the rain subsided, Ahren spread the equipment over the sledge in the hope that it would dry. The ground was wet with the rain that would now descend on the people below, this time carrying the pollutants and poisons of the cloudstraits with it. The wind had not relented, whipping the cloudface into rolling vaporous peaks. Visibility was poor. He'd have to take it slow if he decided to trek today.

Ahren wrapped his scarf around his face and pressed on. He preferred to be on the move. It felt like progress, though he knew in these conditions he could easily get turned around or lost in a cloudmist. He checked his compass often, preferring it to his more technical software. It felt like a more honest way to navigate the clouds. Ahren followed the quivering needle, aware that he was heading in the direction of the sound of bells he'd heard the previous night.

Ahren kept his head down, concentrating on the cloudsurface and compass. Cloud vapour streamed past him, wrapping him up in a blanket of white. He would have probably walked past it had he not lifted his head at that particular moment, thinking he heard the bells.

A line of prayer flags stretched into the dis-

tance, suspended on a length of rope that led into the cloudmist. The colours were so bright they hurt Ahren's eyes. They were comprised of five colours: blue, white, red, green and yellow. Each colour represented a different element and the order was important. He knew it started with the sky (blue) and ended with the earth (yellow) but he couldn't quite remember the significance of the colours in between, except for white. He knew what that stood for. The white flags were only discernible in the cloudmist because of the printed image on their surface, otherwise they would have disappeared into what they revered – the clouds.

The closest one to him was yellow and blown by the wind it looked like diamond or like the crude stars Lucy made out of tissue paper and glitter. As a whole they looked like a strange rainbow, stretching across the clouds like an absurd paper chain.

Ahren had never seen prayer flags in the clouds, though he'd seen many on his way up. They populated the mountains as abundantly as the people. Ahren hadn't expected so many people on this particular massif, though he knew that all the mountain ranges were prone to overpopulation – being the only pockets of affordable land left. It was his father's fault for telling him legends about the unspoilt mountains here. He'd read him and Lucy tales of Shangri-La. Tales of a mythical place, an impossible place hidden somewhere in the Himalayas. Ahren had imagined it nestled among snow-capped mountains, a beautiful lamasery amid a desert of ice and emptiness. An earthly paradise.

As a boy Ahren had tried to find it on his map and now that he was older he'd trekked the plains seeking it, before he finally came up here to the clouds.

Ahren had seen firsthand how densely populated the mountains were now, sprawling cities replacing green plateaus and paddy fields, tower-blocks upon tower-blocks stacked precariously on cliff faces, not like the images in his father's books.

Ahren was resigned to the fact that the landscape of Shangri-La existed only in his imagination. If it had ever existed at all there was no room for it now.

Ahren looked with dismay at the flags flapping above him in the wind and wondered whether he should take them down. They were not a welcome sight, despite their intentions of good will. Prayer flags were not offered to any higher being, they were a prayer to land. They were here to bless the cloudstraits.

And that could only mean that Ahren was not alone.

That evening was damp. The mist hadn't completely dispersed and it lingered in the air like guilt. Ahren warmed his hands by the stove, conscious that the light was a beacon for whatever or whoever stalked him. Clouds above obscured the stars. He scanned the cloudsurface, staring into the darkness. He wasn't afraid of the dark but the unknown was a different matter. *Terra incognita*. Unknown land. *Terror incognito*.

He thought of how cartographers of the past had drawn maps to the edge of the world, a flat earth, before philosophers and astronomers said it was round. Then, if you sailed too far you would fall off the edge and into Hades or Hell or whatever underworld you subscribed to.

They'd said mapping the clouds would be impossible, but here Ahren was, sitting at the top of the world, the vast unknown stretched before him. He'd been in uncharted territory before, but armed with the tools of his trade he didn't need to fear it. But how could he possibly know what the clouds contained? For all he knew monsters could be lurking in the cloudfog.

Ahren stared into the light of the stove. It was far better to draw out whatever it was and face it, than let the unknown haunt him.

Ahren was pitched beneath the prayer flags. He'd thought about tearing them down, of getting rid of all signs that someone had been here first, but he was reluctant to pull out the pole they were connected to. It disappeared deep beneath the cloud surface. It was the fact it could possibly upset a cloudmass, he told himself, rather than his fear of disturbing some kind of spiritual balance.

Ahren tried to stay vigilant but the prayer flags soothed him. They flapped rhythmically in the wind, lulling him to sleep, spreading their blessings like a blanket around his shoulders. Ahren

stared at the colours. Each of the flags were decorated with images of different sacred animals but the one that he was drawn to most was the horse. A wind horse: *lung ta*.

Lucy liked horses. Lots of little girls did. He imagined her now – how old would she be? – and the image his mind conjured was a grown woman with flowing charcoal hair. She was riding a wind horse through the clouds, dipping in and out of the swelling peaks, racing along the cloudstraits towards the sky with its stars shining like tiny diamonds. He could almost see her face, her eyes narrowed in concentration as she guided the horse toward a burgeoning cloudmass, so sure she could penetrate the surface of the cloud just like the birds. A rallying cry, the sound of hooves, the jingling of bells, and then she was bursting through, breaking against the cloudface like an enormous wave, an explosion of particles, foaming and frothing, filling the air with billowing clouddust as insubstantial as breath.

Ahren woke to a blurred world. He lay against the entrance of the tent in his outgear, the sleeping bag a nest underneath him. He was annoyed at himself; it was dangerous to fall asleep outside.

Snow was drifting from the underbelly of the clouds above. The suffocating grey-blue colour of cold. Ahren moved, his body stinging with pins and needles.

Something darted up ahead.

Ahren paused, unsure if he'd seen anything. His mind was fuzzy like the landscape as he waited for the cloudmist to pass. He strained his eyes.

There was nothing there.

Though he desperately wanted a coffee, he decided to forgo breakfast and began packing up. He'd tarried here under the auspicious prayer flags long enough. Maybe it had been a mistake to stay here at all.

Again, a darting motion up ahead drew Ahren's attention. He shone his torch into the white haze, hoping it would penetrate the mist. He caught something running between the clouds.

He stood on weak legs, edging forwards but pushed back by the wind.

"Lucy?"

He waited a long time for a response but none came. When the cloudfog began to disperse he

moved hastily on.

Ahren wished he were still dreaming when he discovered the body. He'd been alerted to it by a host of carrion birds, Himalayan vultures with white necks and tawny feathers making the cloudsurface ahead look dirty. They clung to their feast like a moving mantle, relinquishing their meal only when Ahren deliberately chased them away. Even then they took to the air lazily, unperturbed, and Ahren could still sense them above, circling him and the girl.

It was definitely a girl. Ahren could tell that much. A young woman, actually, by her size and shape. He stared down at the body; it was repellent to see so much of what made up a person but still he stared. The flesh of the face was entirely gone, as was the skin on the torso and the tops of the legs. What was left resembled the crude carvings of an unskilled butcher. Red and wet with glimpses of white bone gleaming beneath muscle and sinew.

"Jesus," Ahren said to the wind.

Around the hollow of her face was a mass of dark bloodied hair, blown into a halo by the wind.

Ahren put a hand to his forehead. How had she gotten up here? Perhaps she'd put up the prayer flags. If so, it hadn't proven lucky for her. He couldn't see any traces of clothing. She wouldn't have been wearing outgear, that stuff was pretty costly. He touched the material he wore for reassurance and cast a glimpse up at the vultures above. Had she been stripped and left here?

Ahren didn't know what to do. It wasn't right for a body to be destroyed by scavengers. It needed a burial. But there were limitations in the clouds. He couldn't bury her up here. He thought about dragging her to the edge of a cloudmass and pushing her over the edge. But he didn't like the thought of her body hurtling toward earth, landing more broken than it was now, and who knew where she would end up? Yet while the body remained here it would only pollute the clouds. It would draw scavengers, and eventually maybe people, with questions. He wished she would just disappear.

The birds circling above waited for him to make a decision. They watched him move on be-

fore swooping down to resume their feast. There was nothing Ahren could do. He hoped the birds were swift about it.

I wandered lonely as a cloud.

Ahren walked the rest of the day in no discernible direction. His footsteps were not buoyed by the clouds as usual, but heavy and concrete. He couldn't get the image of the woman from his mind. He wondered who she was. Her identity along with her flesh, were being picked clean by the vultures.

But more depressing was the fact the clouds didn't belong to just him anymore. Someone else had been here first. And though he had not known of her existence until that afternoon, the notion that he'd been alone all those months was a myth.

He should have been glad perhaps, had he ever really wanted to be alone?

In response he heard the tintinnabulation of bells.

And in the distance he saw a girl.

It had been a long time since he'd seen a child, a *real* child, not just the one that inhabited his dreams. It had been a long time since he'd seen *anyone* for that matter, besides the corpse a few miles back. Ahren sighed. When had the clouds become so populated?

He hoped she was a hallucination, that he had conjured a strange mirage out of cloudmist, but then the girl addressed him.

"What are you doing up here?"

Ahren was somewhat taken aback. He wanted to ask the same question but worried it would sound childish.

"Lucy?" he asked instead. The girl moved closer, out of the blur and shook her head.

"Are you the one whose been following me?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

"To see if you were real."

Ahren looked down at himself, half expecting his body to be grainy and blurred, made of the same transient substance as the clouds. He looked real enough.

"Are you satisfied?"

The girl nodded again, retreating back into the fog.

"Wait!" Ahren called. "Wait!"

He followed the ringing of bells, chasing behind like he was playing hide and seek. Except the girl was too swift and light-footed in the clouds. She disappeared ghost-like, only to reappear a few moments later with a smile and a wave of encouragement. She seemed to want Ahren to follow, though he had no idea where they were going. She was his only guide.

He considered turning around and finding his way back through the cloudmist to his equipment but this was the first person he'd seen on the clouds, apart from the dead young woman. Perhaps they were related? Still, it had been impulsive and potentially dangerous abandoning all of his stuff and running after her. Maybe he'd been up on this cloudface too long. Maybe the altitude was affecting his sanity.

Out of the cloudmist came the façade of some kind of construction.

"What the..."

It was a cabin. It was comprised entirely of wood and had an aged look as if it had been there for a long time, though Ahren knew that was impossible. It appeared to be built on the clouds though Ahren couldn't see a cloudbase. Above the rafters hung the limp bodies of rabbits. A rocking chair on the porch was covered in the hide of some animal.

Suddenly the little girl was in front of him again. Closer than before. Ahren noticed she was wearing a fur coat with toggles at the front, a woollen hat on her head.

"Do you wanna come inside?"

What kind of strange fantasy world had he stumbled into? Ahren could see a wind turbine attached to the roof. It appeared to be a perfectly self-sufficient homestead and infinitely more comfortable than his tent. He stood dumbfounded.

The girl shrugged and went inside. Now that she had led him here she seemed disinterested in him. Ahren wondered why she had brought him. More alarmingly, Ahren wondered if she was alone, like him. He couldn't bear the idea of a child alone in such an unrelenting land. He climbed the steps and opened the door.

A cloud emerged. Ahren took it to be cloud vapour at first until he smelt tobacco. It was an

aroma Ahren hadn't smelt for a long time. It surrounded a man drawing on a pipe. The lips that held it were entirely obscured by a heavy, yellowing white moustache. He had a long fur coat like the girl's. Ahren had the impression of some colonel from some long ago war.

The man stepped out of the smoke. He didn't say a word. Ahren was not one for words either, having exhausted them in his conversation with the girl. They stared at each other for a long time, both painfully sorry at discovering the other's existence. Their fantasy of isolation shattered.

"You'd better make yourself at home," the man said at last.

Ahren followed him into a warm interior. The smell of stew mingled with tobacco suffused the room, which was aglow with candles. It was a basic room, though comfortably furnished. In the corner a bird sat on its perch. A bird of prey, maybe a falcon or a kite, though Ahren wasn't sure. It was tethered and hooded, though it hopped in agitation sensing an intruder. A bell tied around its leg rang with its every movement.

"I see you're a Company man." The man pointed at the branding across Ahren's outgear.

"I'm a cartographer. I work for whoever pays."

The man nodded and gestured towards the stove. Ahren sat down, removing his gloves and holding his hands to the flames.

"Been up here long?" Ahren asked.

"Since last November."

"Last November? But what about the cloud-slide?"

"We were lucky. It passed us by."

Ahren made some calculations and began altering the contours of the map in his mind.

"If you don't mind me saying," the man began, pulling up a chair, "these clouds can't be mapped."

Ahren remembered all the people below who'd said the same thing. Only the Company believed it could be done. When you had enough money you were allowed to believe anything.

"Nearly mapped this entire cloudstrait," Ahren said, feeling a pride he hadn't felt in a long time.

"Not what I meant. It can be done, I'm sure. You're proof of that. But doesn't mean that it should." The man drew heavily on his pipe. "Too much change. Clouds don't want it."

How did this man know what the clouds want-

ed? Ahren remembered the prayer flags, the way they blessed the land. Were they to appease the clouds?

"Can't have too many folk coming up here," he continued. "Only room for a few. Best that this land stays undiscovered, if you ask me."

Ahren could understand why he wouldn't want to share this world with anyone else. Ahren didn't want to share it either. Maps brought developers, and developers meant people.

"I'm just doing my job."

"I'm sure you are."

Ahren sized up the man. Would this be something he thought worth fighting over? He was conscious of the map folded into the pocket of his outgear, close to his chest. He regretted leaving his equipment, anything he could use as a weapon. No-one knew he was here.

"Do you wanna see my pictures?" the girl said. She thrust a series of crayon drawings under Ahren's nose. Pictures of constellations, the stars connected like dot to dots.

The man pulled her back protectively, though she still held her arm out at Ahren.

Ahren took the pictures. They were drawn well, though not to scale.

"These are really good."

The girl beamed.

"Sally, the man's going to be on his way."

Ahren returned the pictures.

"I have more if you wanna look?"

Ahren looked towards the man and back at the girl. "Sure."

The little girl grabbed Ahren's hand and led him to the other side of the room. Dozens of pictures crammed the walls, the constellations forming elaborate patterns.

"Don't you ever look down?" he asked.

Sally shook her head. "Never."

Ahren tried to remember how long it had been since he had looked. It was always accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of vertigo. He felt it now. Here in this room, with these strange people, his eyes full of stars, he felt as if he were plummeting back down to earth.

"I draw pictures too," Ahren said at last.

"Will you draw me one?" Sally asked. Ahren remembered the map he'd drawn for Lucy. Nothing good had come of his drawings.

"Maybe."

Sally smiled and Ahren was reminded of how long it had been since he'd felt the warmth of another's company.

"Sally, time for bed," said the man.

Sally looked disappointed that her time with a stranger was at an end, but she conceded.

"You can keep this one," she said, handing Ahren one of her drawings before withdrawing to her bedroom.

The man poured Ahren a measure of whisky and busied himself at the stove. He dished up a bowlful of stew for Ahren. It smelt incredible. Ahren took the bowl gratefully, trying to dismiss images of carrion birds devouring the woman's corpse.

"How'd you come to be up here?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"Some folks need a little more space."

Ahren looked at the man again. It was likely he was a fugitive. Ahren wished again that he had some kind of weapon on him.

"How do you survive?"

"We have our own means," the man said, pointing toward the bird. It appeared asleep now, clutching its perch with strong talons. It was easily capable of hunting rabbits, maybe even bigger prey.

"And I have my nets."

"Nets?"

"Cast 'em over and see what I can catch."

Ahren couldn't help but be impressed with the ingenuity. They'd made a homestead in the most inhospitable place on earth. But it was built on insecure foundations; Ahren had done the calculations, the cloudslide could have unsettled more than they knew. But Ahren sensed that this man would rather be swept away into oblivion for a few good years in peace, than go back down below.

"Where's Sally mother?" Ahren asked, tipping the bowl and finishing the dregs.

The man tapped his pipe against the table. He looked right at Ahren. "The only reason I've been hospitable," he said, "is because of that little girl. If it were up to me I'd have thrown you off the edge of this cloudface to see if you'd fly. I don't like Company men, and I'm sure as hell not going to share everything personal with a stranger."

Ahren found he couldn't make eye contact. "I found a body a few miles back. A young woman, from what I can tell."

"What are you implying?"

"How did she die?"

The man shrugged. "We all die."

"If a crime's been committed the authorities need to know."

"We're not on earth now, Company man. The law doesn't apply in the clouds. There's only one authority here."

Ahren shifted uncomfortably. It sounded like a threat. "I thought I was alone up here," he said.

"We ain't never alone."

"There's more?"

He nodded.

Ahren's head hurt. The cabin felt too warm, too crowded, almost suffocating.

"Well thank you for your kindness," he said, standing. "I'll be on my way now."

The man nodded. He seemed relieved.

"Say thank you to Sally." Ahren gestured with the picture in his hand.

He walked out into the night, the sky decorated with real stars. The man stood in the doorway within a cloud of his own making.

"Sky burial," the man said.

"What?"

"It's how we dispose of the dead. Give them to the sky."

"You knew her, didn't you?" Ahren pressed.

"There'll be nothing left in a few days," the man said, retreating inside. "She'll be part of the clouds then."

Ahren's father wasn't a particularly religious man, yet in his study, above the bookcase filled with Ahren's favourites poets – Yeats, Wordsworth, Dickinson – hung a huge map of the Garden of Eden. It didn't just depict the Garden of Eden but many other significant biblical locations as well: Mount Ararat, the resting place of Noah's Ark, the kingdom of the Queen of Sheba. Ahren had memorised the outline, drawn to the Tower of Babel, reaching higher and higher to the heavens. The architects then had not been driven by the need for space, but by the desire to touch the divine. At the time, Ahren couldn't understand it, though he mar-

velled at the enterprise.

Ahren had thought it was ridiculous to map a myth, yet here he was in the clouds. It was the only place Lucy could be. He recalled the prayer flags flapping in the wind and his own prayers scattered amongst the clouds. This was the only place left for him to find salvation.

The last time he had seen Lucy was the day of her eighth birthday. He should have known that she wouldn't find the treasure he'd hidden, though he'd drawn a map. The map that led her into the woods and away from the house. She didn't like maps but she was a willing playmate and wanted to please her brother. Ahren had waited at the trail's conclusion, with the locket he'd bought for her wrapped in a box with a blue ribbon. He waited until the sunlight was gone and returned home to the flashing lights of a parked police car.

They searched the woodland but could find no trace of her. Ahren told them they were looking in the wrong place. They needed to look up.

Ahren's father had sworn never to sell but after Lucy's disappearance, the land had become abhorrent to him, polluted in the way the cities were not. A reminder of innocence stolen – paradise lost.

It was what the developers had wanted all along.

Ahren was lost. He knew on this cloudface, without his equipment, that was tantamount to death. He'd tried following his hand-drawn map but the cloudmist was too thick. He needed to find shelter. He considered making his way back to the cabin, throwing himself at the old man's mercy, but then he remembered what he'd told Lucy. If you ever get lost climb up and look down, then you can see the way home.

Ahren made his way to the edge of a cloud-mass and lay face down. He tried to peer through the cloud, pressing his face into it. He couldn't see much of the world below, only what the starlight permitted. He remembered all the trees he'd climbed after Lucy's disappearance, despite his aversion for heights. He remembered the one where he'd found a torn piece of her white blouse. She'd tried to climb up and away as well. He'd always thought if he just climbed high

enough he'd be able to see her. He'd moved into the highest tower-blocks, scaled mountains and finally arrived here at the top of the world, but the view below was always a disappointment.

Lucy was gone.

He pictured the prayer flags, the white one of clouds, ready to wave it in surrender. He stared down at the emptiness below, feeling gravity's pull. He was at land's end, the edge of the world. His underworld was waiting to greet him. He could easily step off the map.

Instead he pulled out the map from inside his outgear. He unfolded it to look at the white expanse he had covered. This was what others sought, a blueprint of the unknown. It would be worth a lot to the Company, and to others. It wouldn't be virgin land then, it would be crowded with people and tower-blocks.

The wind played with the paper, curling its edges. Ahren gripped it tighter.

Done with the Compass,

Done with the Chart!

He ripped the map along its latitudinal and longitudinal lines. He scattered the pieces into the wind, an offering to the clouds to be blown like prayers above the heads of men.

He lay on his back and unfolded Sally's drawing. It was a mirror image of the constellations above. He traced the lines between the stars, imagining them connected by an enormously long string that spanned the galaxy like the contours on a map. It would take light years to follow the threads, to navigate his way through the cosmos. He could follow the stars as old explorers used to. Maybe the stars would lead him to her.

Above, a single star burst across the sky, shining beautifully bright as it expired. She was up there somewhere, Ahren knew, and once he found her he would finally have a place to rest.

In the distance he heard the sound of hooves and the whinnying of a horse, floating among the clouds.

This is Victoria's first appearance in *Interzone*. Previous stories have appeared in *Black Static* and *Shadows and Tall Trees*. She also writes academic articles for a range of literary publications and is a columnist for *This is Horror*, focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth century roots of the genre. Visit her at vhleslie.wordpress.com.



ILLUSTRATED BY DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY

REBECCA SCHWARZ

FUTILE THE WINDS

By day Rebecca Schwarz is a mild-mannered editorial assistant for a scientific journal, by night she writes science fiction and fantasy stories. Her stories have appeared in *Electric Spec* and *The Colored Lens* and are forthcoming in *Stupefying Stories* and *Bourbon Penn*. You can read about her writing life on her website at www.curiousworlds.blogspot.com.

The plant died in her hand, but first it sprouted and grew. Feathery, transparent roots twined around her fingers. A delicate stem rose unsteadily, the cotyledons at the top balled like a pair of tiny fists. The roots thickened, clasping her hand and wrapping around her wrist. The speed of growth was astounding. A breakthrough at last, she thought, her heart pounding. Her head spun and her eyes filled with tears.



She and Jack were down to supplements and furtive mouthfuls of dirt – just for something to chew. For months, crop after crop had failed. They ate the leaves and flowers, boiled the stems and roots until they were soft enough to chew. As the number of plants dwindled, the pollinating insects died. They ground up their bitter bodies and ate them too.

This morning, out of a hopeless force of habit, she sorted through the last dead and dying plant matter – dumping a pathetic handful of organic material into the blender. Too weak to walk over to the tap, she gripped the edge of the table and worked up enough spit to wet the brittle leaves. She ran the machine and scraped the green paste off the blades and sides of the blender with her finger. It was barely enough to load one last Petri dish.

In the beginning, they were like Adam and Eve together in this gorgeous, fragile garden. Tray after tray of sprouts and tender plants crowded the tables. They blended samples and sent them through the gene-mixer, a battered tablet wired to a set of Petri dishes. It continually recombined plant DNA, sorting through the thousands of variants for hybrids that would thrive in the harsh Martian climate, plants to pump oxygen into the air while producing an edible crop.

As if in time-lapse, the first leaves opened, their wrinkles smoothing as the plant continued to grow. Symmetric bumps appeared along the main stem, sprouting into true leaves. She tilted her head up to follow the plant's wobbly progress toward the muted light that filtered through the abraded surface of the dome.

"Jack," she called. Although the green light on the wall indicated the commlinks were open, he didn't answer.

Her body deprived of food, her brain starved of oxygen, she was too weak to go looking for him. She sat heavily on the floor to wait. The roots continued to thicken, and her hand began to tingle. The pace of growth slowed as the stem began to sprout vining tendrils. Her arm shook under the weight of the plant. The leaves trembled.

She tugged at her braid, now streaked with gray, and thought of all the bottles of hair dye lined up on the shelves of all the grocery stores

back in Houston. She'd been with Jack since grad school and gone through every color on those shelves including pink and blue. She almost brought a bottle, they had a sixteen-ounce allowance, but in the end she couldn't decide which color. Instead, Jack packed a bag of grape seeds from his uncle's vineyard and they joked about what to name next year's vintage.

They got a berth on one of the last dualies before the venture capital ran out. MarsCo had been sending pairs of volunteers out for nearly four years by the time they were finally old enough to qualify for the one-way mission. In the end it worked out perfectly. They stayed just long enough to see Tyler married and Sydney defend her dissertation, then left their grown kids to their lives and set off to make the most of their middle age.

The plant's terminus caught her attention. It dipped and swelled, then formed a cluster of pale buds, which opened into a bouquet of delicate bell-shaped flowers. She marveled as their pale petals slowly deepened to the velvety light-absorbing black they would need here.

After landing, they found the previous team frozen to their ship's bunk. They'd successfully raised the GlasTex dome, but apparently failed to convert their ship into a power station. She looked out at the dull-metal curves of the two egg-shaped landers standing side-by-side just outside the dome. It seemed pointless to drag their bodies out into the relentless winds of the surface. The only burial they would be able to offer would be to cover them with rocks, so they left them together where they lay.

She looked back at the plant now swaying above her. The leaves were beginning to droop. She cradled her cold root-bound arm, staggered over to the buckets lined up against the wall, and plunged the roots into the brackish water. With her arm soaking, she sat back against the wall and watched the leaves, willing them to revive.

Jack had gotten both ships converted, but even with two power sources the CO₂ scrubbers struggled. Jack managed to keep them working at around 65 percent, not enough to prevent chronic hypoxia. The plants grew pale, drooped on attenuated stems and failed to set fruit. She and Jack hovered over each crop bickering and

tormenting each other in the low oxygen like the helpless parents of an afflicted child. This dying vine embracing her arm was the last one. She looked away from the plant, its already desiccated leaves rattled in her ear. The walls of the dome were so abraded by the constant sandstorms that the landscape beyond was rendered a blurry orange smudge.

Outside, the sun approached the horizon, small, pale and used up like a lozenge someone left on the nightstand. Above her, in the failing light, a single seed pod emerged from among the withered black petals and dropped into the black water with a plop.

"Light," she ordered.

Overhead, the SimSun flickered on dimly. Jack had diverted nearly all the available power to the scrubbers. With her free hand she splashed around the bucket, grabbing the pod as it bobbed to the surface. It was covered in thick peach fuzz and taut with four perfect bumps.

She stood unsteadily, found the seam of the pod with her thumb and gently pried it open. Four bright, green beans rolled out onto the palm of her hand. Hunger gripped her, startling and predatory. Her mouth filled with saliva and she swallowed, closing her hand around the beans. With careful husbandry and the gene mixer, maybe they could still pull through.

The airlock hissed, and Jack pushed the door open with effort. Once burly, now merely tall, his jumpsuit billowed around him as he crossed the room with slow, deliberate movements. With the frayed cuffs of his jacket pushed up to his elbows, his hands dangled overly large from brittle forearms. She walked toward him, dragging the plant behind her.

"You okay, Leigh?" he said, his voice faint. He took her arm and examined the plant's sodden remains. "What happened?"

"It died."

"In your hand?"

"Yeah, it was the strangest thing."

"That's the last one." He looked around at the abandoned trays of spent soil stacked on the tables. "That's it," he said with relief, and wrapped his arms around her in a wobbly hug. He stepped back and held her face in hands nearly as cold as the freezing air in the room, his

blue eyes bright with tears. "Finally."

She shivered, but for once not from the god-damn cold. She held up her other hand to him and opened her fist.

He stared at the open seedpod and the four beans. "No, Leigh," he said closing her hand. "It's too late."

"But it grew so fast! You should have seen it." She could believe in these seeds even if he couldn't. She held the beans out to him again.

"No!" he shouted. "It's over." His voice filled the room; the last big thing about him, and it cost him. He staggered back and fell against a table, knocking a tray of substrate to the ground.

She reached out to him, knowing that if he went over they would both go down. He swatted her hand away but she caught his arm and they clung swaying to each other. He made a grab for the beans, but she closed her fist around them.

"It's over," he repeated. His fingernails dug into her skin, trying to pry her hand open. "Four beans and that damn machine, Leigh, it's not enough."

Jack let go of her, tottered over to the gene mixer and swept the Petri dishes and pipettes off the table, sending them clattering to the ground.

"Jack, no!"

She moved to him as fast as she could, but it wasn't fast enough.

Panting, he yanked out the wires connecting the tablet to the blender and pushed them both off. They landed with a crash.

"You bastard!" she screamed.

He fell then among the desiccated plant matter drifting to the floor in the cold, stagnant air.

She sank to her knees in front of him, unclenched her fist, opened her mouth and slapped her hand against her lips. Two beans slid down her throat whole, the other two she chewed slowly, feeling their turgid resistance against her teeth. They tasted like the smell of warm grass. She swallowed.

His expression crumbled and his body shook. She thought this was it, a fatal arrhythmia. He would be gone and she would be alone. She grabbed his shoulders.

"Don't go," she begged.

He propped himself up on one elbow and let out his wide-open laugh. She hadn't heard that

laugh in months. Just like that his anger evaporated.

"They taste good?" he asked when he caught his breath.

"Yeah."

He wrapped his hand around hers, pulled it to his dry lips and kissed it.

"I'm sorry. I should have saved two for you."

"Don't worry about it," he said.

"They weren't very filling," she added.

He chuckled and leaned back against a molded crete bench. She scooted over to him and lay against his chest. She could feel each rib through his thermal jacket as she rode the rise and fall of every labored breath.

"Let's just go to sleep, together, like on the ship." His face looked pinched again. The sun disappeared below the horizon, rendering the walls of the dome opaque. She closed her eyes and listened to the wind howl across the land, and to the sand scouring the dome.

At dawn, she felt the sunlight, weak but persistent, and turned her face toward it. Her back rested against the cold crete of the bench. After twenty-one years of marriage she could tell without opening her eyes that Jack was no longer in the room. He probably schlepped back to the scrubbers despite himself.

Normally, there was no rest to be found in sleep. They woke over and over each night gasping and coughing in the CO₂-rich atmosphere. But here it was morning, which meant she must have slept straight through. She took a deep breath. The air smelled fine. Perhaps Jack had made some headway with the scrubbers after all. She opened her eyes and trained them on the sun just breaching the horizon. She watched it climb the dome, letting time flow for once without tasks or schedule.

Jack was right. It was time to give up. Weeks ago, he'd thought to have them record a goodbye to the kids so that Tyler and Sydney's last images of them would not be the hollow faced, emaciated creatures they were today. She grabbed the top of the table and pulled herself up to look for Jack, to tell him they could send that last transmission. That is, if she didn't find him already inert, curled under the scrubbers in the warmth of the generator.

She stood with difficulty. She didn't feel weak exactly, but could only move as if in slow motion. Instead of the hollow dizziness she'd become accustomed to, her legs felt leaden. And her feet were stuck to the floor. She tore her eyes away from the sun and looked down. Her boots had split at the toes. Each disgorged a cascade of roots like twin tentacled creatures. Staring at them, she could just detect movement in the slender, hairy ends as they found out the tiny cracks in the regolith of the floor. It tickled.

She looked at the remains of the plant, still wrapped around her arm. New growth had emerged from the dead material. She moved the broad green leaves aside but could not find her hand among them.

"Jack," she called, her voice a hoarse whisper. She tried again but could not speak loud enough to activate the commlink. Her arm rose up of its own accord, turning its leaves toward the light. There was nothing she could do but wait for Jack to find her.

Noon arrived, then afternoon, the sun seemed to accelerate as she turned her head to follow it. The frayed sweater she wore under her jacket grew tight, stretching against her thickening midriff. The constant, gnawing hunger of the past months vanished.

Outside, the wind raged against the dome. She thought of her grandma's old cabin up in Pennsylvania, and how the wind would rattle the windowpanes. She'd inherited the place, and they took the kids to visit the snow once. The weather had been disappointingly warm until the last day when a blizzard obliged. Their flight home was canceled, which was good since they couldn't dig the car out to get to the airport anyway. The cabin had no power and all their electronics ran out of juice.

On paper the trip had been a disaster, but for Tyler and Sydney it was a grand adventure in an alien landscape. They walked together through muffled, snow-stacked woods and skidded around the frozen little pond. Inside, they left their dripping coats and boots in a pile, and she stoked the old potbelly stove with cord wood while Jack and the kids sat wrapped in blankets on the kitchen floor. She managed to get the stove hot enough to warm them up and make a

few runny pancakes for dinner. After she tucked the kids into the high old bed, Jack dug the last two beers out of the snow by the door. They sat by the stove and talked until who knows when, since grandma's clock had stopped running years ago.

As the sun sank toward the horizon, Jack shuffled in and called up the SimSun. She smiled, soaking up the extra light even as she saw him gasp and drop the handful of supplements he'd brought for dinner. The pills skittered across the floor as he ran stumbling to her. His warm, moist hands gripped her hips. She ached to put her arms around him, but both of them now reached tirelessly upward. She did manage to tilt her head down and realized that she had grown taller than him.

"Leigh, oh my God!" He reached up and ran his fingers across her lips.

She could not speak.

His breath came in rattling gasps as he opened her coat and moved his hands over her body. He pulled a table up to her, climbed up and began ripping leaves away from a raised arm. Pain shimmered through her body even as the skin began to thicken in response.

"Baby, where's your hand?" he said in a high, panicked tone. She'd never heard him sound so frightened. He reached up and cupped her chin in his palm; by this she guessed her face remained recognizable.

She turned her eyes to him, her lips frozen in place, no longer able to even give him a smile.

"Don't worry, I'll get you out."

He climbed down and disappeared from view, clattering around the room. Her plump leaves shuddered against each other. She wanted to tell him she wasn't worried, not with the delicious light above and the cool soil below. She reached into it, growing, anchoring herself to this place.

Her fingers stretched toward the light filtering through the dome. Stitches popped as the seams of her jacket split. Out of the corner of her eye, she could just see the gray insulation around the shoulder squeeze out as spiraling green tendrils emerged.

Jack returned with a pair of pruning shears and cut the rest of her clothes away. With great effort she looked down. Her skin was rough and

dark. Where the bones of her ribcage had stood out from her shrunken flesh, ridges curved up, disappearing under her breasts, which themselves seemed to be growing a rind.

Jack stepped up onto the table and clipped the new growth from her face. The leaves fell away with an itching sensation. His face was contorted with panic and confusion.

"Hang on," he pleaded.

He found the dead plant from yesterday and clipped the leaves away from it, then set the blades on a thick tendril and squeezed them shut. The shears bit into what felt like her wrist. Pain echoed through her body as the severed vine, with the dead plant bound in its tendrils, dropped to the floor. She thought she could scream then, except for the tender shoots that now filled her throat. Sap oozed from the cut, golden and viscous. He swiped his finger through the liquid, tasted it and looked back to her.

"It still tastes like blood," he said. "Don't you leave me here alone."

She wanted to say, "I'm not going anywhere." He would get it. One of her lame jokes. The kind that used to make him laugh.

Hot tears trickled down her cheeks and soaked into the new rind of her neck. He tossed the shears aside, climbed down off the table and rummaged around again in the shadows at the edge of the dome. The adrenaline from his initial panic gone, he struggled back to her, dragging the mattock with both hands.

Below, her roots cleaved the earth, tunneling through the cool, refreshing soil, absorbing microscopic ice crystals. It felt for all the world like catching snow on her tongue. He managed to lift the mattock, swung it in an arc and plunged it into the ground.

The pain when he lacerated a root was dull, distant; she had many roots now. And he grew weaker with every swing. She wished he would conserve his strength, sit down at her feet. Inside her, the shoots waited in the damp darkness. If he could just hang on for a few more days. Finally, he dropped the mattock and fell against her. He ordered the SimSun off, to slow her growth she presumed.

The bark on her neck cracked and expanded when she turned her face to the East to wait for

dawn. She could just feel Jack's slight weight where he rested at the base of her trunk.

Sleeping, please Jack, not dying.

Even in the dark she grew. The dome shrunk around her, close now and uncomfortably warm. She could not stop her growth, only slow it. She would suffocate soon, but she only needed a little more time. The buds pressed against the roof of her mouth. Her leaves brushed the panels at the top of the dome, and she sent tendrils into the seams, anchoring her limbs above her.

When morning arrived she was sure she was alone again. She could no longer tilt her face down or feel his miniscule weight against her trunk. She hoped he would return soon because she would set fruit. She didn't know when, but she knew, like she had known when she was pregnant. She didn't need the grocery store pregnancy tests either time, but she'd bought them, for Jack. They were scientists after all and she understood about proof.

As the sun climbed the sky, she opened what had once been her mouth and let the new stems emerge, each weighed down with a fat, blood red bud. She bent her back and contorted herself to fit within the confines of the dome. Water condensed on the walls, dripping onto her branches. She wouldn't last much longer in this terrarium. Just long enough, she hoped.

Somewhere below she heard Jack enter the room and gasp. After a time she realized he was climbing her, grunting occasionally with the effort. She had many strong branches to hold him. The buds bloomed, ruby petals trembling with joy as they opened. The flowers bowed their necks toward the floor, and she could see him as if through a compound eye.

He climbed in short bursts, wearing only a tee shirt and his trousers, so impossibly thin. He rested often, cradled in her branches, dozing off. There was time still, if she could survive the close quarters and heat long enough.

When he finally reached the top she watched him search for something resembling a face. All she could offer him was a small bouquet of flowers.

He put his nose to the blossoms and inhaled.

"I don't know if you can hear me," he gasped, his voice a rattling whisper, "but you smell beau-

tiful...like that perfume you used to wear." He stroked the rind where her cheek had been. "How did you do that?"

He sat back against the branch that held him, and she saw the belt: his service pistol in its holster. She made her leaves rattle against each other.

No! She would bear fruit; he would have all he could eat.

"I sent our goodbyes to the kids," he said.

She directed a tendril toward his arm but could not grow fast enough to prevent him from drawing the gun.

Instead of bringing the gun to his head, he pointed it up at the dome that sealed her in. He fired again and again until the sturdy composite shattered, showering them in sparkling fragments. When the clip was empty, he let the gun drop and curled his knees up to his chest like a child spooned inside the crook of what had once been her neck.

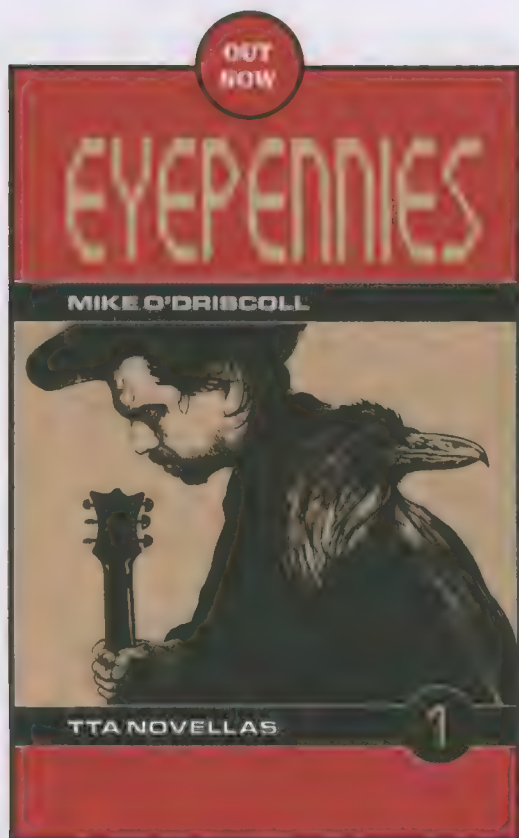
The wild, perfect atmosphere rushed in. The wind whipped around her as she grew up and out, sending tendrils down the sides of the dome.

Jack lay motionless in the bone breaking cold while flowers sprang from every branch, velvet black and tough. It took time to set fruit, longer than he would have lasted. As her growth slowed to something more sustainable, the days spun by faster. She stood over the ruins of the dome, clinging to the regolith and rode the planet as it twirled around the sun. When the bean pods did come, the wind snapped them off greedily, sending them flying in every direction.

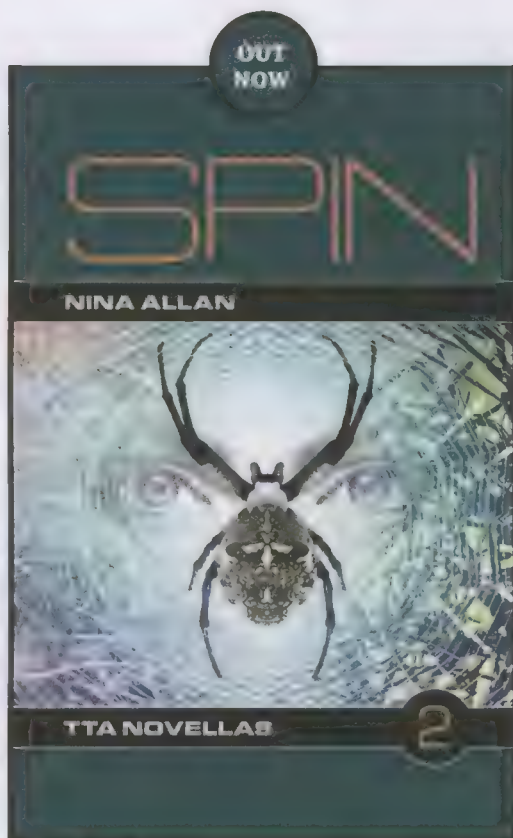
Her memories began to fade as she wrapped Jack's body in a green cocoon of tendrils that slowly solidified into a hard lump midway up her massive trunk. As she took his body into hers what she remembered was their eighteen-month trip here.

A blur of vague moments stretching back to Earth like a line of bread crumbs. The pinging alarms that roused them out of induced hibernation to grumpily complete some checklist or other. And the torpid lovemaking with Jack before reconnecting to their IVs and curling up together in the pod's dual sleep chamber, their body temps cooling, pulses slowing in lockstep with each other.

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the frog king's daughter

RUSS COLSON

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

ARNIE ASHTON DIDN'T REMEMBER much from his years as a CEO, although sometimes when he lassoed a fly on his sticky tongue he found the idea of eating insects vaguely repulsive. More than anything else, he remembered his daughter, Amy. Surprising, since he'd paid so little attention to her in the busyness of his former life. But she often came down from the house to toss stones in his little pond, and that kept her in his thoughts.



Today she talked on the phone. He watched her from his lily pad, noticing the way the sun glinted like copper in her brown hair. He liked the sound of her voice, washing over the water like a warm breeze.

Not that he understood what she said. Not without linking to the nanocell mind sealed in the rock at the north end of the pond. He could remember language, but his frog brain couldn't process the sounds fast enough. Usually he just listened, not trying to understand. Not necessary in this new life.

This time, her face stiffened and her voice grew sharp. She rose from the small bench by the pond and walked in agitated circles near the bush where the cat often hid. Concerned, he activated the radio link with his nanomind, accessing his full mental capacity, and caught the end of the conversation.

"Of course I can't do that," she said. Then, "No."

A short silence. "Who is this?" She took the phone from her ear and stared at it, her jaw clenching.

He wondered what problems or dangers she faced. He felt proud that, after finishing her graduate degree in engineering, Amy was taking over the company. His company. But she was so young.

He opened a link to Operations, the big computer in the boulder at the south end of the pool. He'd not done that for a year now. Pointless until he decided on a Campaign. But Operations captured and archived local wireless communication. He'd insisted on that kind of power when he made the bet with Joel.

He played the recording of the full conversation.

"Hello." Amy's tone sounded light, like she expected a call from a friend.

The voice on the other end came through muffled, altered. "You have no business running a major corporation."

"Excuse me?" More startled than frightened. Not some timid mouse, his daughter.

"The board won't allow this." The caller paused before the word 'allow', giving a sense of threat to his words.

Amy ignored the threat. "I know there's concern, but I bring a passion for my father's com-

pany that no one else has. And it's not like I don't listen to people."

"You need to sell your stock."

Amy's voice sharpened. "Of course I can't do that."

"You won't give up control?"

"No."

"Then, I'm afraid we'll have to take other measures." The tone carried even more threat than the words.

For the first time a hint of fear entered Amy's voice. "Who is this?"

The connection ended.

Amy returned to the bench, her face older as she gazed across the pond. Arnie wanted to help. He might use Operations to learn who threatened her and stop them. But that would definitely count as a Campaign. And he only got one. He still hoped to seize that one chance to be human again.

He could try to piggy-back the two efforts into one Campaign, but Arnie doubted that he could sneak anything past the software. Joel had been a great programmer and planned for everything.

Everything except dying. Funny how people failed to plan on life's most certain event. Now, the bet had no good way to end. Without Joel monitoring, Arnie wasn't even sure his human body was still alive.

Arnie checked the bush for the cat, watching for the twitch of its tail in the shadows. Not that the cat would eat him, given his bitter skin, but cat-play wasn't much fun for the frog and tended to be rather mortal.

No cat. He hopped from his lily pad onto the shore, and from there toward Amy on the bench. She spotted him on the fifth hop and leaned over to pick up a stone. With each hop he expected the crush of the stone on his back, but he kept going. One stone splattered in the wet ground just inches away. Amy bent to pick up another.

Like father, like daughter. He used to throw rocks too, as CEO. He hoped she didn't become as ruthless as he once was, but he saw the signs. Funny how being a frog had changed him. He didn't have to throw rocks anymore.

Amy raised her arm as he stopped at her feet. She couldn't miss at this distance.

She stared down at him for a moment as he sat

in the warm grass looking back at her. She hesitated and then laughed and dropped the stone. "OK, Frog." She picked him up and set him on the bench to her right. "Maybe you can give me some inspiration."

Arnie sat with her until the sun fell low on the horizon, delighted with their improving relationship.

The next day, Amy came down to the pond with a young man in his late twenties. Holding hands. As they approached the pond, she dropped his hand and picked up one of the flat stones scattered along the water's edge. "I bet I can hit the frog before you."

Arnie's heart sank as he realized that the progress he thought they made yesterday came to nothing. He gathered his legs under him and prepared to dive.

"Hey, you shouldn't do that," the young man said. "You might hit it."

Amy snorted. "That's what makes it fun."

"Not if you're the frog."

Arnie liked this guy.

Amy hadn't thrown anything yet, so he stayed on his lily pad and listened. "Dave, you have to focus to perfect a skill. That's the whole point to throwing rocks."

Dave laughed. "I think the point is to watch the ripples and be with me."

Amy laughed warmly but her tone retained an undercurrent of challenge. "OK. How about if we see who can skip a rock the farthest?"

Dave's face scrunched up in distaste, but he leaned over to pick up a stone, a wide flat one. "Not everything has to be a competition," he said.

"Sure it does." Amy skipped hers, four, five, six times until it thudded into the simulated-rock casing around Operations at the south end. "That's how you succeed. Steel sharpens steel."

Dave threw his stone, shorter skips but more of them, five, six, seven before it sank in the water at the edge of the pond. "How can you be so sure you'll succeed at everything?" he asked. "Don't you ever doubt?"

Amy paused with her second stone, and then flashed a confident smile. "I can do whatever I set my mind to."

Arnie's heart thumped with pride in his daughter. So much like him.

Maybe too much like him.

He recalled what he told Joel nearly three years ago. "Smart people always rise to the top, Joel. I could be a frog and still become CEO."

Joel had smiled his wicked sideways smile. "Care to bet on that?"

Of course, he did. They arranged for Arnie to disappear in Greenland, presumably lost in a glacial crevasse. They programmed Operations to referee the bet and made the frog-transfer. And then Joel got hit by that truck, cutting Arnie's thread back to humanity.

The funny thing was, he didn't really care to be CEO anymore. He had different interests now.

But he did want to be human again. Then he could share the time with Amy that he had missed sharing when she was young.

Dave stayed more than an hour. He walked with Amy along the edge of the pond. He gave her a hug when he left. Once, Arnie could have done those things. Although, back then, he just wanted to be CEO.

After Dave left, Amy got a phone call. Arnie listened to her end of the conversation, apparently talking with a friend.

"Yes, he was just here. ... No, I didn't tell him about the call. ... I know, he's smart and in a position in the company to help me, but ... Well, like today he worried about a stupid frog in our pond behind the house. ... I suppose not. ... Maybe. We've talked of marriage, but he hasn't asked me yet. ... Of course I trust him. I'll say something tomorrow. ... Sure, you too. Bye."

So, Dave worked at the company. And liked Amy. A Campaign began to form in Arnie's nanomind. With an ally on the inside, Arnie could help Amy overcome whatever corporate enemies she'd gained. The confidence he'd always felt as CEO surged through him again, and he puffed out his frog belly with a big gulp of air.

The next day, Arnie opened his Campaign, keeping busy so he didn't dwell too much on the fact he was giving up his one hope of being human again. And his hope of being more than an absent father to Amy.

He logged the key objectives and basic plan

into Operations and checked it against the simulator to make sure he wouldn't run into unexpected restrictions in what Joel's software allowed. He found none.

He learned Dave's contact information from the company computer – he retained access to that – and sent a short text. "Someone in the company has threatened Amy. Can I count on your help?"

Dave responded within moments. "Of course. Threatened by who? And who are you?"

Arnie composed his answer more from a sense of irony than any expectation of getting past the software Joel wrote to enforce the rules of their bet. "I'm Arnie Ashton. I turned myself into a frog as part of a silly bet with my friend Joel and now live in the pond behind Amy's house."

Joel's Operations software altered the declaration to a single sentence. "I'm a security program from Arnie Ashton, scheduled to activate on his death."

So much for letting Dave know he was still alive.

Arnie continued composing the message undeterred. "I need for you to hook up your phone to a button camera to give me a continuous audio-video feed from your location. I include an address to send the feed below."

Arnie sent the message. As an engineer, Dave shouldn't have a problem with the task. Arnie turned his attention to finding out who threatened Amy.

Operations had recorded the threatening caller's phone number when it captured the wireless signal. He checked the archives to see if Amy received any other calls from that number. She hadn't.

He checked for other local access to or from that number. Only one. Two years ago, a wireless call to that number originated from just down the street. Arnie played the recording of it.

The phone call consisted of only two words, "It's done", and had no response.

Two years ago. Arnie checked the time, already guessing what he'd find. Five in the afternoon. Ten minutes after a truck roared around the corner, jumped the curb, and ran over Joel.

So Joel's death had not been an accident after all. Whoever threatened Amy had been working

to control the company a lot longer than a few days.

Only a handful of people could expect Arnie and Joel's deaths to give them a shot at controlling the company. All friends. Almost, he didn't want to know which friend had done it.

Despite his disappointment in friendship, he realized – with a surge of hope – that the connection between the threat to Amy and Joel's death might give him an opportunity to link his present Campaign with recovery of his body. He ran a simulation to see if he could slip a second stealth Campaign past the software. Surprisingly, the program gave him access to the whereabouts of his body – an automated medical vault in Ames Iowa – as well as a live-time monitor of its condition – he was still alive.

His heart raced with hope for only a moment before the simulation results played out. Joel's software wouldn't let him do it. Getting his body back, like telling people he was a frog, counted as a high level 'cheat' by the rules of the bet. He was supposed to accomplish something as a frog, not as Arnie Ashton. He could get his body back only if he gave up all other Campaigns.

And a Campaign to get his body back would take too long to save Amy.

Thus, he couldn't return to his former life. He couldn't walk with Amy as a human along the edge of the pond, or toss stones with her and watch the ripples radiate. He couldn't talk with her about her life, her hopes and joys.

He had to give up all those things he longed for, if he was to protect Amy's position in the company. He wondered if he'd have made that unselfish choice during his days as CEO.

He had to learn which of his former friends threatened Amy. Derrick Doane, the CFO, came to mind. Once, Arnie reprimanded him when he shifted future income into the current quarter to meet analyst expectations. Derrick never forgave him for that reprimand. Of course, not all disgruntled colleagues became murderers, but it gave him a place to start.

Unfortunately, Arnie found nothing suspicious when he checked the company computers for transactions originated under Derrick's password.

Maybe he shouldn't be looking under Derrick's

password. If Derrick hoped to undermine Amy's position in the company, one way to do it was to make her look like a crook. He might arrange for suspicious transactions to be under her name. As CFO, Derrick had full access both to company financial accounts and Amy's workstation.

Arnie checked for transactions appearing to originate from Amy's computer and found a series of illegal fund transfers to a Swiss bank account. No doubt the Swiss account could be linked to Amy. Not a particularly sophisticated fraud, but good enough that a jury might believe it the work of a young engineer recently out of grad school.

So, Derrick planned to seize control of the company by destroying Amy's integrity. Arnie felt the soft tips of his frog toes curl as his frog brain flooded with anger.

The video feed from Dave began about 1pm. Originally, Arnie had hoped to get clues from the video as to who was threatening Amy. Now, he hoped for ideas about how to stop Derrick. Shortly after the feed began, Dave met with Amy and Derrick. Arnie viewed the video with increasing consternation as Amy confided about the threatening phone call to the very man who planned to frame her. Arnie approved of her trust of Dave. Given his hesitancy to throw rocks at frogs, Arnie rather hoped she married him. But Derrick, always a personable guy, had won her trust as much as Dave, and that bothered him a great deal.

"That's terrible, Amy," Derrick said, his voice dripping with concern. "You should get a gun. Protect yourself."

Arnie tried to grind his teeth at Derrick's insincere words of caution, but, of course, he had no teeth. Quite the metaphor for his status as a frog. He had no means to stop Derrick's plan, and couldn't even tell anyone about the problem.

He'd been arrogant to think determination and intellect alone were sufficient for success. A frog had hurdles a CEO didn't imagine. No doubt Joel was looking down with sad vindication.

Not that he couldn't fix the fraud, even as a frog. His old passwords remained active, and he could make the fraudulent transactions go away. But the real danger was the bond Derrick had

built with Amy. If the fraud went away, he'd just try again, and Arnie might not catch it a second time. Somehow, Arnie had to get Amy to see Derrick for what he was.

That evening, Amy brought a new 22 caliber semi-automatic pistol out to the pond. She set up a row of tin cans along the retaining wall between the excavated back yard and the higher ground to the east where an acre of oak woodland bordered their estate. She emptied a clip, sending stone chips – and a few cans – flying. She grew better with practice and didn't miss on the last three shots.

Arnie checked for the cat and then hopped over to the patio table where Amy was just sitting down in one of the chairs. He froze when she glanced at him, fearing she might throw rocks, although he hoped his boldness won some empathy.

She picked him up and set him on the table. "You're a brave Frog. Why do you want to be with me?"

"Croak," he said.

"What do you think Frog?" she continued. "Do I really know what I'm doing?"

"Croak, croak," he said.

She smiled and turned her eyes to watch a clutch of early fall leaves swirl in a gust of wind and then scamper across the yard.

He so very much wished to tell her that he was proud of her and that she did know what she was doing and would make a great CEO. That is, she would make a great CEO if she got the chance.

That chance might depend on what he did to stop Derrick. He shifted his feet uneasily on the cool table. He'd always felt so sure as CEO. He didn't feel as sure as a frog. Did *he* know what he was doing?

He'd been quick to suspect Derrick, based on vague suspicion. Quick to think he understood Derrick's plan to frame Amy for fraud. He'd been as smug in his understanding of the present situation as he'd always been as CEO.

But suddenly he realized that the threatening phone call didn't quite make sense given Derrick's plan. The phone call merely alerted Amy to potential danger, and had nothing to do with framing her for fraud. It seemed to threaten her

life, not just her integrity, and that left Arnie with more unease than he'd ever felt as CEO.

The next morning, Amy got a call from Derrick. She took the call in the house, but Operations captured it and Arnie listened in.

"There's some irregularities in the accounts," Derrick said. "We should talk. I'm coming over with one of the junior accountants who found the problem."

So, the fraud was coming out. Arnie might already be too late to correct the books, by now backed up multiple times. He might be too late to save Amy's integrity.

A deeper worry niggled at Arnie's nanomind. Why would Derrick come here, with the accountant who discovered the fraud, but without police or other witnesses? Why not destroy Amy's ability to run the company without further ado?

With a growing sense of dismay, Arnie realized he'd misinterpreted the evidence. He twisted his head in frustration, missing a fly that chose that moment to buzz within reach of his long tongue. He should have figured it out sooner. It explained the threatening phone call. It explained why Derrick encouraged Amy to get a gun.

Derrick didn't plan to merely frame her for fraud. He planned to frame her for murder. By making the threatening phone call, he got Amy to buy a gun. By keeping the meeting today private, he could create a motive for Amy to kill the accountant, and then when Derrick killed the accountant using Amy's gun, a jury would believe Amy did it to protect herself.

Unfortunately, as a frog, he couldn't convince anyone. He had to get Dave and the police to see the real story. He contacted Dave, instructing him to come to the house with the camera, record everything, but stay hidden. Then he hopped around the edge of the pond, past the retaining wall, and up through the fallen oak leaves to where the retaining wall overlooked the patio. Amy usually brought work colleagues to the patio for conferences, at least when it was warm as it was today. He hopped from the leafy ground onto the cool stone at the top of the wall. From this perch, he could watch the conference unfold below him.

Derrick and the young accountant arrived about ten in the morning. Derrick brought the new gun onto the patio. He must have asked to see it while still in the house. He played with the gun as the others took seats around the table. The gun's blue-black metal contrasted with Derrick's white gloves, no doubt worn to ensure that Amy's prints were the only ones on the gun.

Arnie saw Amy notice the gloves, an odd item to wear on such a warm day. Her brow wrinkled in concern, but before she took any action, Derrick spoke.

"Amy, John here has reported some irregular transfers to accounts you hold in Switzerland," he said. "Have you been skimming money from the company?"

Amy opened and closed her mouth but no words came out. She shook her head vaguely. John, the young accountant, looked at his feet, perhaps embarrassed to catch his boss in fraud.

Derrick waved the end of the gun toward the accountant with casual threat. "Isn't that right John?"

John's eyes fixed on the gaping barrel, suddenly more concerned with that than with his embarrassment.

Way too overt of a threat. Arnie had thought he had more time, that Derrick would kill the accountant at some later date. Instead, it seemed clear that Derrick planned to kill the accountant right here and now. He was wearing the gloves not only to keep his fingerprints off the gun, but to keep any gunpowder from his own skin. Arnie had presumed Derrick would continue to play the part of the sympathetic but disappointed friend as Amy went to prison. Instead he must want Amy to know that he'd beaten her. Arnie berated himself for yet another bad presumption.

Derrick turned the gun downward and shot himself in the leg. A dark stain spread across his pants where the bullet punched a hole. No doubt to insure that his telling of events carried more weight than Amy's. Arnie marveled at the man's determination, and that he kept himself on his feet.

The accountant screamed and rose from the table. Amy grabbed for the gun, but Derrick stepped back, closer to the wall. "I'm sorry Amy.

But it's my company now. I can't let you ruin that."

He turned again toward the accountant who stumbled backwards, tripped over a flower pot and fell to the stone patio. Arnie watched the gun barrel rise toward the young man, a slow-motion tragedy he was too late to stop. Too late to contact the police. Too late for the accountant. Too late for Amy.

Arnie perched on the wall only four feet from where Derrick stood. He had one last chance. He launched from the wall onto Derrick's gun hand. Derrick flinched, more from a startled reaction to Arnie's slimy touch than from the weight of his slight body. The shot missed the accountant, discharging onto the paver stone beside him.

With a scowl, Derrick flung Arnie to the ground. Arnie bounced once, then righted himself and faced Derrick. His former friend ignored him and raised the gun back toward the accountant.

Much too far to jump this time. In his arrogance, he'd not only been unable to retake his company as a frog, but he couldn't even save the company for his daughter. He felt the chill of failure seeping through his fingers and toes. He'd never felt that as CEO. Yet another experience his life as a frog had brought him.

At that moment, Dave flew headlong from the wall behind, his shadow briefly blocking the sun. Dave hit Derrick at the knees, tackling him to the ground. The gun skittered across the patio and into the grass. Derrick struggled to rise until Amy picked up a heavy ceramic flower pot from beside the table and conked him on the head. He fell unconscious to the stone pavement.

Neither Dave nor Amy moved for moment, but then Dave rose and hugged her. "You OK?" he asked.

She nodded. "How did you happen to be here?"

"I got a text from one of your dad's security programs in the company computer. Said to be here and record everything."

"You have all this recorded?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Derrick's on his way to prison for sure."

Arnie hopped back toward the pond, relief flooding him at the success of his one Campaign. Although, success came in concert with

the lesson Joel intended. Even the smartest CEO isn't complete master of his destiny. Arnie hadn't won by his own skill alone.

But, then, he didn't have to. He had Dave and Amy.

The next day, Amy came down to the pond with Dave. They sat on the wrought iron bench by the pond. Eager to celebrate with them, Arnie hopped off his lily pad and advanced along the shore. In his excitement, he forgot to check for the cat. He always checked for the cat, but somehow he just forgot. Too late he spotted the cat's tail twitching in the shadows of the bush. The cat's tail froze, half raised, prelude to its ruthless charge. The edge of the water lay three leaps away. Much too far to revise his careless action. The cat took two quick steps, and Arnie readied his legs for one last hopeless leap.

Then the cat flew into the air, lifted by the scruff of its neck. "No you don't Cat," Amy said, wagging her finger in its face. "This is *my* Frog."

She set the cat down by the bush and picked up Arnie with both hands. She carried him to the bench and set him next to her, Dave on one side and he on the other.

The black iron felt warm in the afternoon sun. He settled his belly against it. He would have liked to talk with her, like Dave did so easily. Plan with her the future of the company.

He couldn't do that. But he could sit with her and watch the ripples in the pond, glad that he didn't have to throw rocks at anyone. Happily, Amy seemed less inclined to throw rocks as well.

Arnie decided he liked being a frog. He'd learned things he never learned as CEO, like valuing loved ones and the importance of friends and colleagues.

And – his eyes caught on a tasty morsel headed his way – he'd learned to feel a bit sorry for the flies.

Russ lives with his wife Mary on a farmstead far enough from city lights to see the Milky Way and the aurora borealis. He teaches planetary science, meteorology, and geology at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He worked at the Johnson Space Center and at Washington University where, among other things, he studied how a lunar colony might mine oxygen from local rock.

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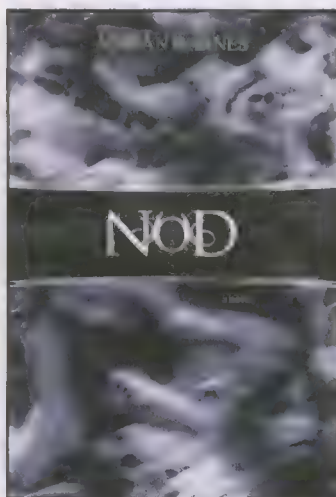
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Paul Kincaid

Nod, the first novel from Adrian Barnes, is yet another zombie apocalypse. The zombies this time around are the sleep-deprived. One night, for no apparent reason, 90% of the earth's population find themselves unable to sleep. We don't know how news of this occurrence travels around the world, since we don't see anything outside Vancouver, where the novel is set. And come the morning, we don't see people stocking up on sleeping pills, as we might expect, but rather there is immediate panic. Instant television programmes tell us that after so many days without sleep people will go mad, and after so many more days they will die. And that is the story; this is what we see happen over the course of the novel.

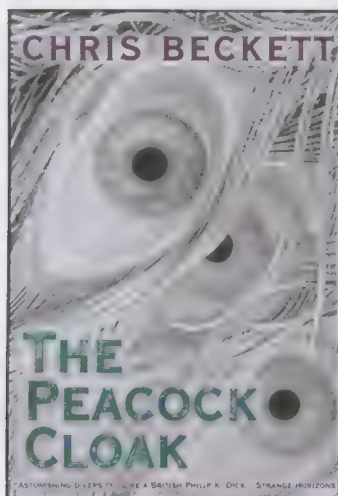
Somebody makes the unsubstantiated claim that sleeplessness is caused by microwaves, and with an efficiency that is truly a wonder to behold, every government around the world cuts off every form of microwave. This doesn't make much sense, but it does serve to isolate Vancouver, cutting it

off from power, communications, food supplies, anything else that might hold a community together.

Our narrator, Paul, a writer of obscure books about etymology, is one of the few people still able to sleep; his wife, Tanya, is sleepless. Their various travels about the city, since no one can stay in one place during an apocalypse, allow us to witness routine examples of looting, brutality, mob violence. Children seem largely unaffected by sleeplessness and have managed to form a feral community in the city park, though they are all curiously rendered speechless; Paul and Tanya rescue one of them, Zoe, and treat her as their adopted child. Meanwhile a charismatic street person has used Paul's work as the basis for a new religion of the sleepless. Paul is reluctantly recruited as his prophet, though he and his family are increasingly in danger as the madness grows. Even so, we wander away from this community several times, in order to encounter a group where the sleepless pretend to be sleepers, or to meet mad people whose hallucinations seem to take physical shape.

None of these communities are consistently presented. There is a suggestion that all the sleepers share the same golden dream, though Barnes does not explore what this might presage. There is little sense that any of the situations have been rigorously thought through, so inconsistencies run right through the book. Incongruities range from the structural (the novel, structured as a diary though supposedly written after the events, is littered with cliffhangers that are inappropriate for either narrative form), to the chronological (time frames are skewed, events that have happened once are referred to as regular occurrences).

Nod was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award; one can only wonder why.



THE PEACOCK CLOAK

Chris Beckett

NewCon Press pb, 239pp, £10.99

Jack Deighton

This is Beckett's second collection, containing twelve short stories – with a few commonalities in background – that have been published during the past five years. They span a wide range of perennial SF concerns: social or technological extrapolation, global warming, enigmatic aliens, their strange worlds, parallel universes, stargates, altered histories, plus a genuflection to Arthur Clarke's 'The Nine Billion Names of God'.

'Atomic Truth' contrasts the seeming connectedness of the digital world with the distancing it carries along with it. Everyone wears bugeyes, interactive goggles that form an interface between the real and virtual worlds and display emails, ads etc. Everyone, that is, except Richard, who has no need of goggles to see visions. His encounter with Jenny provides a small moment of humanity in his disorientated world.

The style of 'Two Thieves' is reminiscent of a fairy tale – a form which has less than cosy attributes. The thieves, exiled to a remote and totally secure penal colony,

start work on an archeological site, where they uncover a relic of the Old Empire. It's a spatial gateway, which of course they jump through. There is some nice foreshadowing here that is both blatant and subtle at the same time. 'Johnny's New Job' is set in an Orwellian society with a Stakhanovite labour force and a justice system to gladden a tabloid newspaper proprietor's heart. Offenders against the public good (who all seem to work in Welfare) are demonised by the authorities. These unfortunates are named and, worse than shamed, guilt by association is afflicted on their families. Johnny goes along with the general mood, then gets an unrefusable job offer.

On the planet Lutania lies 'The Caramel Forest', a malodorous place of grey, brown and pink vegetation contrasted by the bright green of settlers' lawns. The Lutanian indigines nicknamed "goblins" can project settlers' thoughts back into human minds. The Agency running the planet tries to protect them but the original human settlers have their own way of dealing with them. Cassie, the child of a constantly arguing Agency couple on a tour of duty, is influenced to escape the rows by running off into the forest. In 'Greenland', Juan Fernandez is a refugee from Spain scraping an ever more insecure living in a slowly submerging south-east of England flooded both by global warming and the so-called beachrats, illegal immigrants lucky to escape the machine-gunners on the shores. He loses his crap job but his future is determined by a lucrative offer to copy him in a hazardous matter-replicating machine. 'The Famous Cave Paintings on Isolus 9' depict a God fashioned, as all gods are, in the image of the locals. He is imprisoned and can only dream of escape. The narrator's Uncle Clancy, a famous womaniser who has finally fallen in love, sees them, and is terrified.

'Rat Island' is a take on our reckless consumption of fossil fuels. A child, whose civil-servant father confides to him the inevitability of the consequent crash and likens us to introduced rats on an isolated island eating all the seabirds' eggs, finds his only consolation is the taking of photographs.

'Day 29', Lutania again. Stephen Kohl is coming to the end of his tour of duty for the Agency and is frustrated and worried by the thought of the memories of twenty-nine days he will lose when he undergoes Transmission back to civilisation.

England is occupied, taken over by Brythonic Celts expelled from Britain by the Romans into France, Iberia and the Americas. They have come back to the land they claim that God gave them. The scenario has implicit and explicit parallels to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and, in common with that, isn't resolved. Beckett's framing device lets its story, 'Our Land', off that hook though.

In 'Poppyfields', a brownfield site subject to a development delay, waif-like Tammy Pendant – who has taken slip, a drug which pierces the membranes between universes – materialises in front of bird-watching Angus Wendering. Angus is easily led. The creator of a fabricated world called Esperine finally enters it. The copy of himself he installed there comes to confront him wearing 'The Peacock Cloak', a shimmering all-powerful device he has used to rebel against Esperine's tameness.

Some of these tales have an overly conversational tone, parts have a tendency to be told rather than unfold, info dumping can be intrusive and there are occasional disjunctions where story elements seem to clash but, in all of them, Beckett never loses sight of the humans he is writing about. Here we are in all our folly – and occasional glory.

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

2.

Dominion of the Dead.

It is impossible to overestimate quite how much human culture owes to the motivational powers of corpses. The nobles of ancient Rome would proudly fill their homes with the funeral masks and portrait busts of celebrated ancestors. Though macabre by contemporary standards, these installations served not only to impress visitors but also to remind younger nobles of what their family was capable of achieving. To grow up surrounded by images of famous ancestors is to grow up knowing the yardstick by which your life will be measured by generations to come: Will you be one of the fabled dead who inspire others to reach new heights, or will you be one of those embarrassing failures that are safely tucked away behind a potted plant or an umbrella stand? The only way to ensure a prominent position was to follow in your ancestors' footsteps and do what your family expected of you.

While the structure of the family may have shifted over the last few thousand years, the bonds between cohorts have not: Born into an existing culture, we are subject to the causes, burdens and obsessions of past generations. Their prejudices are our values, their values are our laws and even when we do decide

to rebel, we invariably wind up rebelling against their institutions meaning that our ancestors still set the terms of engagement. In our culture, every writer must have an inspiration, every scholar must have a bibliography and every critic must show that she is familiar with the classics of the field. We are crushed and shaped by the wishes of our cultural ancestors and we allow this to continue because only the dead can grant legitimacy, without them we are not so much originals as we are bastards. The only way to free ourselves from what the American academic Robert Pogue Harrison calls the "dominion of the dead" is to acknowledge its existence, recognise its power and seek new bases for legitimacy and excellence. The time has come for us to free ourselves from the history of science fiction.

The popular history of science fiction is one of unceasing progress. This genre, we are told, sprang from a primordial soup of ancient literary antecedents featuring visits to other planets and conversations with gods. Fed on this antiquated gruel and profoundly connected to the zeitgeist of their day, a group of nineteenth-century writers emerged and began producing the kinds of story that



eventually ossified into a genre when American editors decided that they needed templates to help them fill and market their pulp magazines. Aside from uncovering a large market for stories of scientific wonder and adventure, the pulps also helped to create a market for longer-form stories that allowed generations of novelist to refine, transcend, and eventually deconstruct the genre templates laid down by those who came before. This story, we are told, is one of perpetual refinement and progress as what we think of when we talk about science fiction has evolved from an assortment of barely-fictionalised thought experiments into a sophisticated literature filled with well-rounded characters, compelling narratives, stylistic experimentation and unyielding thematic complexity. Subjected to this history in countless book reviews, anthology introductions and award ceremony preambles, we believe because we are flattered. Who wouldn't want to be a part of an on-going project? Who wouldn't want to be part of a cultural scene that has never been more complex, sophisticated and innovative? We believe in this history of science fiction and in so doing mistake it for something that actually happened.

Like the children of Roman senators, we have fallen asleep surrounded by funeral masks and awoken with heads still heavy with the dreams of the dead. The funeral masks of writers like Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein continue to stare down at us and while these ghastly waxen figures may inspire some, many feel their presence as an unwelcome and uncomfortable constraint on how we think and talk about contemporary science fiction: What is science fiction? What types of stories are science-fictional? Who writes these types of stories? These are questions that can only be answered in terms of what has come before and thus contemporary science fiction writers are forced to follow the agenda set by previous generations. The effects of this pressure are particularly evident when it comes to the diversity of the field, is it really any surprise that science fiction struggles with issues of diversity and inclusivity when the history of the field appears to have been completely dominated by white middle-class Anglo-American men?

The history of science fiction is a battleground and no battle is more righteous than the on-going campaign to restore writers such as Joanna Russ and Alice B. Sheldon to their rightful places in the history of the field. Though widely celebrated during their most productive years, many writers associated with 1970s Feminist SF saw their reputations obscured by the huge popularity of Cyberpunk. One of the many lessons that Cyberpunk learned from Feminist SF was the importance of knowing exactly where you stand in the grand scheme of things. For example, stories such as William Gibson's 'The Gernsback Continuum' and essays like Bruce Sterling's preface to the *Mirrorshades* anthology

explicitly set out to position Cyberpunk as both heir to the New Wave's radicalism and cure for the reactionary stuffiness of so-called Golden Age SF.

Unfortunately, in order for Cyberpunk to position itself as the saviour of science fiction, people needed to believe that science fiction was in trouble and so a period dominated with thematic experimentation and radical gender politics was gradually re-invented as a corrupt and self-involved 'me decade' that did little other than set the stage for the arrival of Gibson and co. Faced with a choice between uncomfortable historical fact and a historically inspired epic of narrative death and cybernetic rebirth, many people chose the epic and, in the words of fan and critic Jeanne Gomoll, dumped many Feminist science fiction writers out of cultural memory.

The moral of this story is to choose your literary ancestors wisely: Cyberpunk cut a dashing figure by ignoring the legacies of Joanna Russ, Alice B. Sheldon, Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin in favour of a far more flattering arrangement featuring the likes of J.G. Ballard, Alfred Bester and Hugo Gernsback. Cyberpunk rewrote the history of science fiction to suit its needs and the time has come for us to make it new again: If we want science fiction to have a future we must first ensure that it has a suitable past.

If all the funeral masks above our beds are of straight, white, middle-class, Anglo-American men then chances are that we will live our lives believing that science fiction exists purely for those types of people. When asked about the themes and concerns of the genre, we will shrug our shoulders and point not just to the past but to the past as it was understood by those who came before us. Books like Helen Merrick's *The Secret*

Feminist Cabal, Brit Mandelo's *We Wuz Pushed* and Julie Phillips' *James Tiptree, Jr* are incredibly important as they disrupt that historical narrative and show us that science fiction need not be a boys' club. We choose to celebrate Joanna Russ as one of the greats of the field because her mere presence in the history of science fiction serves to open up the future of genre and transform it into a place where brilliant, angry and politically engaged women can make their marks as both authors and critics. We choose to celebrate Joanna Russ because we want to believe in the future she symbolises and by choosing to celebrate her instead of the authors we inherited, we are remaking the history of science fiction in our image and making our ancestors work for us.

Far from being monolithic and absolute, the history of science fiction is a construct as shallow as it is fragile. Rather than obediently following the conversation we inherited, the time has come to look at the world and imagine what type of science fiction might fit this new and terrifying future. Tomorrow's SF must be more diverse, more inclusive, more engaged and more willing to experiment and it is up to us to construct a historical legacy that will support this literary future. We need the anger of Russ and the gender uncertainties of Tiptree but we also need to recruit ancestors from other genres, cultures and media. As I will explore in my next column, the twin forces of capitalism and postmodernity may well have denied us a single coherent future but lack of an obvious way forward need not condemn us to nostalgia as it also leaves us radically free to imagine a future that is uniquely our own. The history of science fiction is dead...long live the history of science fiction.



**THE SCIENCE OF DISCWORLD
IV: JUDGEMENT DAY: IT'S
WIZARDS VS PRIESTS IN A
BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE OF
ROUNDWORLD**

**Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart
& Jack Cohen**

Ebury Press hb, 342 pp, £18.99

Duncan Lunan

Popular science books come in several guises. The most basic is aimed at absolute beginners, explaining the topic as simply as possible. In writing classes, when asked how to get the science right in SF, I often recommend the children's section in libraries because the books are comprehensible, up-to-date and accurate.

Books for more advanced readers often have some form of conceit, in the old meaning of the word: "an ingenious, fanciful or witty thought or expression; a far-fetched or exaggerated metaphor". One of the more demanding is *The Ancestor's Tale* by Richard Dawkins, which tells the story of evolution backwards from the present to its origin. In their collaborations such as *The Collapse of Chaos* and *Figments of Reality*, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen have used the conceit that

the Tralfamadorians of Vonnegut's novels are commenting on human affairs, particularly in science. The view from outside is fascinating, but those are not books for beginners.

In their collaborations with Terry Pratchett, the background is that our Earth ('Roundworld') and the cosmos which contains it are the accidental products of an experiment on Discworld (inverting the situation of Gregory Benford's *Cosm*). In *The Science of Discworld*, the Wizards visited Earth at various stages of its history and found that intelligence evolved several times, only to be wiped out by asteroid impacts, before we ("the monkeys") developed space elevators and got out before the crash that would have finished us.

In the Discworld reality, our world really was created by an old man with a beard, but the Wizards are determined that we should not find that out: in the second and third books, their powers are required to stop other forces on Discworld from altering the Roundworld course of events. *The Science of Discworld III: Darwin's Watch* was devoted to making sure that Darwin did after all write *The Origin of Species*, when interference from Discworld had caused him to write *The Theology of Species* instead, and the Auditors, personifications of one of Stephen Hawking's metaphors, were equally determined that the historical timeline should not be changed back.

The Science of Discworld IV: Judgement Day follows the formula, with chapters explaining the true history of cosmology and evolution, and how we know it to be true, alternated with the fictitious struggle to keep it that way. The baddies this time are the Omnians, a religious sect who believe Discworld's flatness to be an illusion, and

claim ownership of Roundworld as a symbol demonstrating the truth of their belief (unknown to the god in whose name they proclaim it). The angle character is Marjorie Daw, a librarian from Earth with strong views on the matters under discussion: she has attracted the attention of parents, teachers, the library's governors and others by her insistence that the Bible belongs on the shelves of fantasy and science fiction. She is accidentally transplanted to Discworld by a glitch in the Great Big Thing, which "every university must have, sooner or later", an experiment intended to determine the fundamental basis of magic. She quickly becomes involved in the court case for the ownership of what is, after all, *her* world, in a sense that neither the Wizards nor the Omnians can assert.

And while the wrangle continues, the alternating chapters go far beyond the metaphor to explain what the underlying issues really are. The topics begin with particle accelerators (Great Big Things), and include, but are not limited to, the scale of the Universe, the nature of science, the age of the Earth, turtle myths, causality, quantum physics, rainbows, orchids, the shape of the Earth, the origin of the Moon, the origin of life...and that's only in the first half of the book. It definitely can be recommended to beginners in science.

As C.S. Lewis adds in the Appendix to *Out of the Silent Planet*, "more than this it would be unwise to say" without either giving away the plot or being drawn into the whirlwind of topics. Read *Judgement Day*, read the whole *Science of Discworld* series, and find out just how complicated it can get. But the series does provide a new and excellent starting point for new writers who want to get the science right in SF.

**VURT****Jeff Noon**

Tor hb, 368pp, £16.99

POLLEN**Jeff Noon**

Tor pb, 366pp, £8.99

Iain Emsley

Jeff Noon's first two novels come together as one extended story. It sets up the feather motif and the constant chasing of the illusion in his later novels. Re-reading the anniversary edition of *Vurt* brings back memories of some heady days when Madchester was the cultural centre. After a series of novels, he appeared to stop publishing apart from Twitter stories until the recent *Channel Skin*. Reading these anniversary editions is a reminder of a great novelist who created a fiction that merrily played with form and genre.

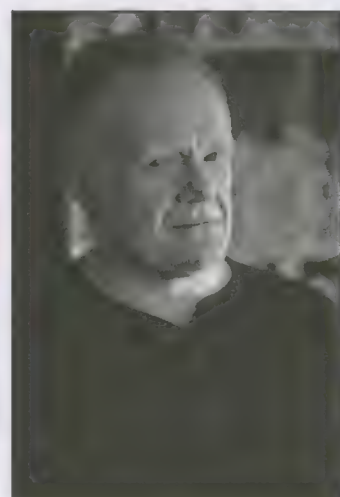
Vurt is the story of Scribble who is searching for his love who has disappeared into Vurt. His search for the yellow feather to take him into the centre of the dream means losing his name and identity. Game Cat, who travels between the worlds, is rather surprised when Scribble achieves his goal and shows him the truth about another character, Miss Hobart.



Noon echoes and tickles the Alice books, playing with readings and their own essence. This edition comes with three new short stories that extend the threads without diminishing the original novel. In *Pollen*, Sybil Jones is searching for the cause of the deadly pollen outbreak. In the cracks of the city, pollen and nature force their way into the world.

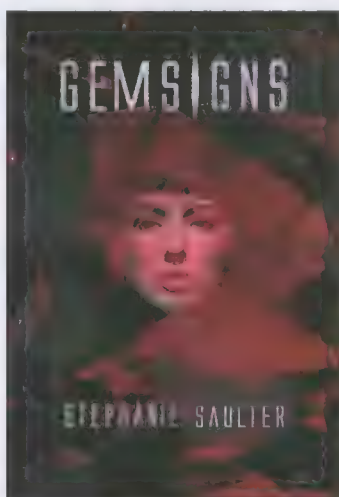
What comes out of this is an experimentation with genre and culture, an extension of the truly English weird. Nothing is really safe from being referenced, with film and music coming to the fore. It almost reflects a certain nihilism of Irvine Welsh, but Noon finds a way of exploring not only the culture around him but also remixing *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Noon does need to question whether we choose a large TV or culture. Each person exists because they believe that they do and the realisation that the story might be a dream of Miss Hobart might be irrelevant. In *Vurt* we live in the dream but *Pollen* takes through into the looking glass world, or perhaps out of it, and brings the fantastic rudely into our conscience. It is not a gentle awakening and the city is simply not ready for it.

Coming back to this novel post-



New Weird is refreshing. Whilst reminiscing of rave and ecstasy, madness and controlled chaos, there is a very human story of loss and a desire to find a loved one that links both books. Yet *Pollen* reflects the horror of the *Vurt* dream, the addiction of the dream as opposed to *Vurt*'s celebration of it. *Pollen* begins subverting its references when it explores what happens when the expected plot is radically altered and expectations fall apart. Noon does not entirely move into the fantastic which leaves him more in line with Jonathan Lethem or William Gibson. His genre world is only just removed from this one once the Beat literature is stripped away. The near future may not be for him but the street finds its own uses for culture. Mixing English weird fiction, folk music and Classical mythology, Noon reminds the reader that the strange and uncanny is old, and that he is following in the tradition.

Perhaps they are of their time but there is an originality to them which is still relevant and dangerous. Noon still comes across as a wildly original author, playing with form and genre. That might be a frightening thought but these books are wonderfully peculiar and worth re-reading.



GEMSIGNS

Stephanie Sautler

Jo Fletcher Books tpb, 389pp, £14.99

Juliet E. McKenna

Advice for aspiring writers seemingly always includes “start your story with action”. Consequently it’s noteworthy when a debut author has the confidence to do something different. Sautler begins by reflecting on the nature of circles and their applicability to human affairs. Can we really understand history if we believe that events are endlessly repeated? Is a spiral, a vortex, a helix a better metaphor for life? That’s worth considering in itself.

But don’t worry that philosophical debate weighs this story down. Sautler quickly focuses on two individuals: Dr Eli Walker and Gaela Provis Bel’Natur. What have they started? How far are their actions and reactions cause or effect? Not that we’re given much time to consider this. By the third page the action has definitely begun as men, dogs and helicopters pursue a girl through a mountain forest to an abrupt and shocking conclusion. Thereafter the pace doesn’t let up until the final page.

We next meet Gaela in London, when she’s struggling to get home

in a reclaimed slum. Her kind are refugees with recent legal protection but they still run the gauntlet of the unmodifieds’ resentment. With glowing red hair that’s her particular gemsign, designating a genetically modified individual, it’s hard to go unnoticed. Now Sautler discards the remote viewpoint she’s used effectively thus far for a closely focused third-person narrative that shows us this strange yet familiar world through Gaela’s human yet enhanced eyes, drawing the reader deep into her pain and insecurity. But migraine or not, she cannot walk past an abandoned baby.

By now the reader will have plenty of questions. What’s happened to London? What was the Syndrome? What is the Declaration? Sautler shows fine instincts for what queries to leave hanging and when to answer them. We realise that Gaela was fleeing a Bel’Natur Retrieval Squad earlier on. But what was she doing in a Himalayan mine and why are gems in danger of forced repatriation and indenture? The only way to find out is to keep turning the pages as this book demands continuous, active engagement in the best traditions of SF.

Dr Eli Walker is looking for answers and powerful interests want him to accept the ones they’re offering. He’s on the train, en route to a conference to present his research into gems, as their legal status is debated. Zavcka Klist of the bioindustrialist conglomerate Bel’Natur argues that gemtech companies should once again guide and care for their creations. Who better understands the unpredictability and inadequate socialisation intertwined with their abilities and modified bodies? She wants what’s best for everyone and offers Eli shocking confidential data to bolster her argument. Not that Sautler offers us these details initially. Here and

elsewhere, by showing us Walker’s and other people’s reactions to reported events, she sneakily tempts us to make our own judgments on incomplete information. Just like the unmodified population do about gems.

Showing this journey through Eli’s eyes, Sautler broadens and deepens her future world, revealing a deft imagination for extrapolated technologies. Suitcases that wheel themselves, keyed to their owners? Great. Equally she shows us the potential misuse of things like security scanning apparatus. The boon and curse of social media’s role in the story has similar contemporary resonance. Further insight is apparent as we learn about the evolution of the double-edged biotechnology which once offered life-saving advances to humanity. The perils of unintended consequences have been core themes of SF since *Frankenstein* but Sautler repeatedly combines originality and relevance. Considering financial implications, she doesn’t merely devise monolithic corporations taking advantage of unfettered capitalism. The man on the street worries about his pension. Won’t everyone be better off, the gems included, if they’re returned to their makers’ protection? But what then?

Walker is determined to judge for himself. Some gems are willing to give him access to their community, led by the charismatic yet mysterious Aryel Morningstar. The gems also have norm allies as well as unforeseen talents to balance their undeniable vulnerabilities. But can Aryel counter Klist as brutal action prompts reaction on both sides? Is she ruthless enough to accept the sacrifices needed? Or has inviting Walker in opened the door to disaster? Sautler brings her intricately woven story to a dramatic conclusion which simultaneously satisfies yet demands a sequel.



SEOUL SURVIVORS

Naomi Foyle

Jo Fletcher Books hb, 449pp, £16.99

Ian Sales

Some time in the near-future, an asteroid is detected on a collision course with Earth. Its existence is denied by media and governments, but hackers find evidence of the "truth" in governmental computer systems. Damien is a slacker who believes in the asteroid. His plan is to find the safest place on the planet and then move there, but to do that he needs money. So he agrees to smuggle drugs into Korea for a friend, and then stays on.

Sydney is a Canadian prostitute who has been taken to Korea by her boyfriend, Johnny Sandman, and is now working as a model. Johnny, an ex-gangbanger, works for ConGlam, which is some sort of shadowy transnational. One of the projects he is overseeing in Korea is VirtuWorld. This is the brainchild of genetics genius Dr Kim Da Mi, who also plans to build a faux-European mediaeval theme-park village in the mountains north of Seoul, where her genetically-engineered "children" will survive the impending catastrophe.

Lee Mee Hee is a North Korean

villager who has had herself smuggled out of the country by ConGlam. She is taken to China, where she meets a number of other North Korean women. After they have recovered from their ordeal, they are taken to the purpose-built village in South Korea, where they are to become surrogate mothers for Da Mi's "children". Sydney will be the egg donor and Johnny the father. But Johnny proves to have some genetic abnormalities which rule him out. Damien, who resembles Hugh Grant, is a much better candidate. When he learns of this, Johnny is not happy; he's also losing Sydney, first to a Korean artist and then to Damien.

Seoul Survivors a readable pacey near-future thriller but it seems a little confused as to what it is actually about. Mee Hee's narrative is wholly about the village of soon-to-be genetically-engineered children, but Sydney's story chiefly concerns her love-life. Damien is living the life of an illegal immigrant, saving up for a false passport and an airline ticket to Canada. When Da Mi recruits Sydney to the VirtuWorld project and Sydney persuades Damien to donate sperm, he's not told the true reason. And the objective of the Virtuworld technology is initially presented as the ProxyBod-real-life avatars put together from corpses and various electronic systems.

Despite having been published by a genre imprint, *Seoul Survivors* doesn't read much like SF. The near-future it describes so closely resembles the present it's hard to determine exactly what are meant to be genre tropes and what are simply setting. There is a vague move in the direction of one or two science fiction ideas – Da Mi introduces Sydney to a therapeutic VR tool; there's the ProxyBod; and then there's the asteroid itself lurking somewhere in the background (or not). The

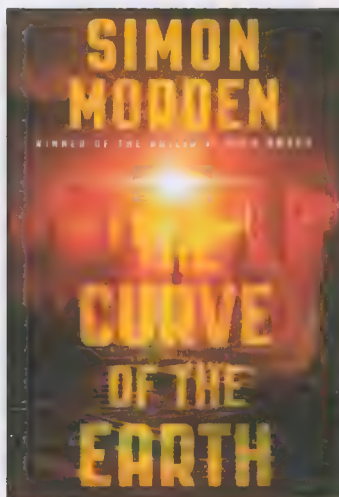
world-building is almost wholly reliant on depictions of present-day Seoul, although there are one or two mentions of climate-crash elsewhere.

Foyle has chosen to present many of her Korean characters as speaking pidgin English throughout – in fact, the first line of the novel is: "Ni-suh, Sy-duh-nee – *Omhada* – look at camera – thank you – better – pro-fesh-ional – Now, play with Hot-Cold, plea-suh!" Though this may give the narrative some verisimilitude, these days it's a difficult trick to pull off without causing offence. And, annoyingly, Foyle refers to the mobile phone throughout as a MoPho rather than mobile or cell or whatever term Koreans might use (it translates as "handy phone", apparently).

None of this, in and of itself, prevents the book from being readable and entertaining, but the cast are something of an obstacle. Sandman is racist, sexist and violent, thoroughly unpleasant, and responsible for several incidents of sexual violence which leave a sour taste. Damien is passive and not very interesting. Sydney is none too bright, while Mee Hee Lee is unworldly and naive. Even Da Mi is self-centred and arrogant and far from likeable. It's not a particularly edifying group of characters on which to hang a story.

There's a feeling throughout *Seoul Survivors* that it's a book whose whole is not greater than the sum of its parts. While there are some well-handled set-pieces, the story-arc is sign-posted far too blatantly, and the violent climax comes across as somewhat cartoonish because it tries to resolve all of the narratives at once.

The advance publicity calls *Seoul Survivors* a "cyber thriller", and it certainly feels more like a thriller than science fiction. Whether this is a strength or a weakness is hard to say.



THE CURVE OF THE EARTH

Simon Morden

Orbit pb, 373 pgs, £8.99

Simon Marshall-Jones

It goes without saying that a good book should pull you in from the first paragraph, and then mercilessly drag you along for the subsequent ride. Simon Morden's near-future techno-thriller *The Curve of the Earth*, featuring the continuing character of Samuil Petrovitch, performs this act to a tee.

A little background: The above mentioned Samuil Petrovitch is a physicist, inventor of various types of whizz-bang technology, but he's also something of a one-man cyborg army, who's saved London on many an occasion. In this episode, his daughter, a scientist like he is but very much human, has gone missing from a research station in remote Alaska and he's determined to find her and bring her back. As with most of these situations, it's never quite as simple as that and plans, carefully laid, are apt to go awry – in this case quite determinedly so.

As inferred from the above statement, Morden's tale hits the ground running and the pace never lets up. Action is almost

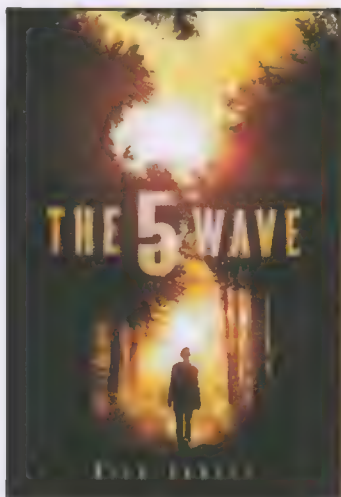
constant, the brief interludes where matters slow down very few and far between. This rapidity also applies to the characters: Morden sketches each one with a minimum of strokes, yet despite the brevity manages to capture the individual with pinpoint accuracy. Samuil Petrovitch himself is the epitome of the wish-fulfilment cypher: a genius, fitted with all manner of cybernetic enhancements which enable him to enact stuff most could only dream of, and being to all intents and purposes an irresistible force. He's also as rough and ready as they come, spitting out a stream of Russian invective and threats of physical violence unbecoming of your typical postdoctoral scientist. Imagine, if you will, a rough-around-the-edges Doc Savage, but this one's a Man of Mostly Titanium and Computer Add-Ons. Morden has endowed him with a three-dimensional personality: gruff and grumpy he may be, but he does have his soft spots, especially when it comes to his adopted daughter.

The other main protagonist, Joseph Newcomen, is the direct opposite. He represents everything that Petrovitch isn't: ineffectual, scared, an upright and clean-cut, straight-down the line, play by the rules, intensely patriotic and hidebound tiny cog in a vastly impersonal machine. In the internal parlance of the book, he's a Reconstructionista, a fully paid-up member of the authoritarian, paranoid, quasi-fascistic government of the United States. He is detailed to act as Petrovitch's escort on US soil, but even from the beginning it's obvious he's out of his depth; our friendly neighbourhood cyborg is a free spirit, planning on the fly and executing whatever it is that he needs to get done without consultation as to anybody's reservations on the matter. Newcomen, however, is not just a foil and a

counterpoint: there's also a politico-philosophical angle embodied in these opposites. Newcomen representing an extrapolation of present trends in the American political landscape. He is a thoroughly unpleasant man, not in terms of nastiness, but in the way he encapsulates the ideals of a rotten governmental system that only offers 'freedom' on its own terms. We are not meant like him, we are meant to feel sorry for him – he is a willing victim of a system that really doesn't give a damn about the individual and yet he is unable or unwilling to see it.

The novel has a drive all its own, a force which impels the narrative along at a relentless clip. There are no wasted words – it's all short, sweet, and to the point. There's much wondrous technology present: it's almost casually incidental, and the reader, not being bogged down in pointless, lengthy exposition, accepts it all without blinking. It's pervasive, especially so in Petrovitch's case. This partly explains his seeming omnipotence, allowing him to hack into other tech and take it over for his own ends. There are some spectacular set-pieces that he initiates which more than adequately outline the man's prowess.

Yes, there is an element of pulpiness about the plot and its execution, but that should be seen as a compliment and definitely not as a negative. This is a wonderful romp through a near-future society, a world where people still have to struggle for survival and the same old hiccups plague the smooth running of international relations (only with the added complication of a mightily transformed America and not necessarily for the better). *The Curve of the Earth* is completely enveloping and thoroughly absorbing in its realisation. Morden is a master storyteller. You should immediately buy a copy of this book and read it.



THE 5TH WAVE

Rick Yancey

Penguin pb, 457pp, £7.99

Peter Loftus

Nobody really knows how to react when an alien ship is glimpsed on the edge of the solar system. Most spend their time watching footage of the craft drawing closer and speculating on where it has come from. Whatever the aliens intend, surely the governments of Earth will have a plan...

Then the attacks begin. The First Wave is a complete global power failure of the type we've seen much of lately – planes drop from the sky, cars stall on the highways and homes are plunged into darkness. The Second Wave is quite literally a wave. The aliens drop a BFO (very large object) into the Pacific Ocean and let the seas do the rest. The Third Wave is a virus which leaves its victims screaming and ejecting bloody fluids from every orifice. The Red Tsunami kills four billion in three months. After that things get really messy. The Fourth Wave introduces the Silencers, aliens in human form who patrol the wasteland mopping up the last clumps of human resistance. We join the action with the Fifth Wave impending.

Even if the publicity hasn't told you, it is obvious from the start that *The 5th Wave* is being set up as the next *The Hunger Games*. The movie is reportedly on the way and Penguin Books are so confident that they have set aside a marketing budget of \$750,000 for the novel. The most pressing similarity is Cassie, our late-teen female heroine. While the character is well-drawn, comparisons with *The Hunger Games'* Katniss inevitably exist. Watchers of NBC's *Revolution* will find parallels with Charlie Matheson too. To an extent these comparisons are unavoidable and will actually be welcomed by their fans.

The post-apocalypse America that the novel presents, coupled with the fact that most of the action takes place in forests and cabins, reinforces our feeling of familiarity. The themes are another common element – take a sassy American teen. Remove the trappings of civilization. Destroy her family and kidnap a sibling and see how well she copes. Throw in a love interest or two and let them fight the oppressors together as their romance blooms. From a feminist point of view, it is great to see so many strong female leads... but what does it say that most of them are primarily occupied with trying to protect their family and find a boyfriend?

The narrative is broken up into several arcs. Cassie's part tells of her journey to find the alien base and rescue her brother Sam, interspersed with flashbacks that tell the story of each successive attack and its effect on her and her family. The other major strand deals with Zombie, one of many youths collected by the military and reprogrammed as killing machines bred to fight the enemy. Not even their names from the life before are permitted to remain.

Yancey has made creating and detailing his protagonist Cassie

central to the work. She was clearly one of those characters that absorbs the author and takes on a life of its own.

The Cassie sections are told from a first person perspective and this, with the level of realistic detail provided, means that we get to know her intimately. Yancey's efforts pay off, and Cassie has our sympathies from the outset. Zombie, the secondary character, is accorded somewhat less weight, but this isn't a problem considering that his main role is providing a vital alternative perspective on the plot.

As with the best young adult novels, *The 5th Wave* is immensely readable. The prose brings Yancey's world to life through snappy, effective descriptions. Action and dialogue are at the forefront, meaning the reader is quickly engaged and is carried along. The pacing is good too, with plot elements being released at regular intervals to ensure a juicy revelation every now and then. As the narrative progresses, reversal follows upon reversal, building a sense of confusion and as the characters try to figure out what the hell is going on they have our full support.

There is a touch of the Dan Browns about the climax of the book. All the events fit well with what came before and Yancey does a good job of wrapping up all of the various threads, but it all feels a bit too neat – a bit too much like the writer covering their own backside – and the action feels a tad plastic in its efforts to create a sensational ending. Who knows, though? It might go down a treat with the younger readers and will most likely translate well to screen.

The slightly overdone ending notwithstanding, *The 5th Wave* will have no problem garnering fans among teens and will no doubt please many adults along the way.



**SOLARIS RISING 2: THE NEW
SOLARIS BOOK OF SCIENCE
FICTION**

edited by Ian Whates

Solaris Books pb, 384pp, £7.99

Ian Hunter

We were recently joined in the pub by a student who asked “What is science fiction?” Fifteen minutes later, when Hal Duncan had paused to take a breath, someone else leapt in and said “What if” stories”. The student nodded sagely and pushed her recording device across the table. It was a pity I didn’t have a copy of *Solaris Rising 2* with me, because then I could have said “Here, read this – it’s a pretty good starting point”.

Picking up on the “what if” idea, I like to think, rather like a time-travelling observer from Kristine Kathryn Rusch’s story, I could have secretly observed each writer as they had their “what if” moment. That, for example, might be watching Nick Harkaway as he had the idea for his story ‘The Time Gun’ which is the shortest, though possibly most entertaining, story of the collection and I’ll say no more about it, but the clue is in the title. Enjoy.

James Lovegrove’s “what if”

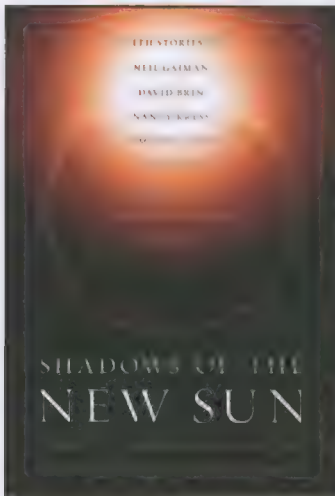
moment for his story ‘Shall Inherit’ might have been “what if there existed the nanotechnology to mop up oil spills?” However, that is merely Lovegrove’s starting point in a poignant, multi-layered story that would not have been out of place as an old *Twilight Zone* episode. Likewise, Liz Williams’s ‘The Lighthouse’ might have started by supposing you and your mother were the last two survivors of an alien race that has almost been hunted to extinction, and what then happens if the hunt isn’t finished after all? And, of course, the story is a whole lot more than that. Story is king, but what also matters in science fiction more than any other genre are ideas that blossom into those “what if” moments. For some of these writers they come in the extrapolation of current technology or the way society might be going, say, from a cultural perspective such as when we follow the roving Victaz crew in Neil Williamson’s ‘Pearl in the Shell’ as they scour the city searching for the next big thing in music. The widening divide between the rich and the poor is examined in Nancy Kress’s ‘More’ where the elite few can remain safe behind force fields while the many can only watch longingly from the other side of the barrier.

Martin McGrath’s ‘The First Dance’ has the wonderful conceit that if the major memories of your life contain a piece of music or a snatch of film or TV programme then you have to pay a copyright fee in order to retain that complete memory to ensure there are no blanks as events are replayed through the hardware device implanted in your head. But then what happens, as you get older, when the annual fees are outwith your financial grasp – how far would you go to retain the memories that are precious to you?

Solaris Rising 2 clearly demonstrates the breadth of the genre, particularly in two “harder” offerings from Adrian Tchaikovsky and Eugie Foster. The former tells the tense and gripping story of a rescue mission where the rescuers have to avoid sharing the same fate as those they have come to rescue; while the latter shows us a society where everything is not as it seems, where image and beauty is all, even if you have to deceive the ones around you, never letting them see the real you below the image you project. Both stories zing with hard science though I must confess my greying brain cells did have some trouble keeping up with the language in Foster’s tale.

Perhaps my favourite story here is ‘When Thomas Jefferson Dined Alone’ by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, where time travel is possible and the travellers of the future think they can observe the past unseen and without influencing it. Yet, historical evidence is coming to light that the wives of Presidents were becoming interested in the supernatural, the existence of ghosts and holding séances in the White House. Could the time travellers be the ghosts that are haunting the past? What works well is the downbeat, slightly inconclusive ending. The genie could be put back in the bottle but it’s just too time-consuming, too much hassle to prove this is really happening and, hey, going to the past is fun, isn’t it? Nothing is secret from the prying eyes of future scholars or future voyeurs, no matter how shocking or intimate.

To sum up: *Solaris Rising 2* is a must-read for those seeking an introduction to the genre, or those looking for well-written, entertaining, and thought-provoking stories from some of the best talent around. Here’s to *Solaris Rising 2.5*.



**SHADOWS OF THE NEW SUN:
STORIES IN HONOR OF GENE
WOLFE**
edited by J.E. Mooney & Bill
Fawcett

Tor hb, 416pp, \$25.99

Stephen Theaker

Not to be confused with the book of critical writings by the same name about the same author, this is an anthology of fiction celebrating the work of Gene Wolfe. Two of his own stories bookend the collection. In 'Frostfree' Roy Tabak gets home to find a new refrigerator with unusual capabilities has been delivered. The story develops in interesting directions, but in itself isn't quite enough to demonstrate why Wolfe is the kind of writer to deserve a tribute. Closing story 'Sea of Memory' is more reminiscent of the work for which he is lauded. Adele is helping to build a colony, but memories are foggy and time seems confused. The conclusion disappoints, but the disorientation is convincing.

Neil Gaiman may attract as many readers to this book as Gene Wolfe, and 'A Lunar Labyrinth' won't disappoint them. An afionado of rural attractions goes to see a maze which visitors would wander at night, until the locals

decided to burn it. Less stellar names offer stories that are just as good. Steven Savile's 'Ashes' is a moving, subtly magical story about Steve, whose sweetheart died; in desperation he goes on the honeymoon they had planned. '... And Other Stories' by Nancy Kress plays on the fiction-hopping of *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories*, telling the story of Caitlin, cursed by her grandmother to live through the most miserable of fictional lives. Jack Dann's 'The Island of Time' riffs on the same source, but this time fiction is an escape from abuse. The stories here are generally short, but Aaron Allston's fifty-page 'Epistoleris' justifies the space it's been given, from its clever title – it's a story of gunslingers told through a series of letters – to its equally clever ending.

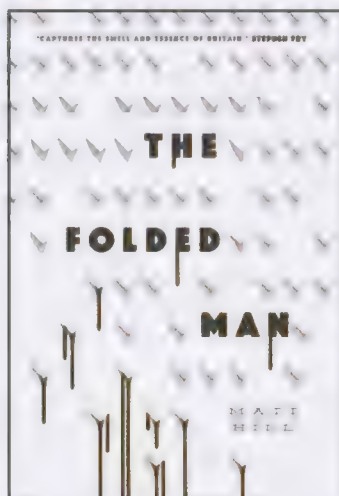
The notes don't always identify the stories to which these are paying tribute, and most can be enjoyed without having read the originals, though that means you get Wolfe's ideas secondhand. 'The She-Wolf's Hidden Grin' by Michael Swanwick, about the daughters of a wealthy perfumier, and whether they are the descendants of colonists or the descendants of natives who murdered and replaced the colonists, is one of the best stories here, but 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus' deserves to be read first. Mike Resnick and Barry Malzberg's 'Tourist Trap' visits the protagonists of 'The Marvelous Brass Chessplaying Automaton' in a Bavarian prison, and makes more sense read after the original.

Despite the title, disappointingly few stories connect to the *Book of the New Sun*, though of course there's more to Wolfe than that quartet. 'In the Shadow of the Gate' by William C. Dietz has Severian, between *Shadow* and *Claw*, targeted by an offworld assassin and battling beast men while passing through the great wall surrounding Nessus. The queerness of Seve-

rian's world is captured better by Jody Lynn Nye in 'The Dream of the Sea', set after the coming of the new sun; the Order of Esoteric and Practical Knowledge sends Nedel on a quest to find the missing Autarch. Severian makes a guest appearance (as does Wolfe) in Joe Haldeman's 'The Island of the Death Doctor', a *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* with fictional rather than historical characters.

Surprisingly, Wolfe is revealed as a friendly, convivial figure, quite unlike his stern, unforgiving narrative style: "what would you do to earn a Gene Wolfe approving chuckle?" asks Judi Rohrig, while Nye describes him as "a courtly gentleman with a twinkle and a sense of humor, modest, patient, appreciative". The notes mention convention encounters as often as his fiction, creating a sense that many contributors were chosen as much for their friendship with Wolfe as their artistic affinity with his work. *Songs of the Dying Earth* introduced Jack Vance's readers to writers with similar sensibilities; that's less likely to happen here, but the range of stories will encourage readers to explore Wolfe's rich back catalogue.

Michael Stackpole's 'Snowchild' is a good adventure story – a soldier and a war-mage form an unhappy alliance to rescue a girl from the maggot-folk – and his X-Wing novels have their admirers, but one wouldn't especially recommend them to Wolfe's fans. Timothy Zahn's 'A Touch of Rosemary' is a fun, clever fantasy, as the Wizard Knight sees off an invading witch king by inviting him to dinner. 'The Log' is a good story by David Brin about Russian families living miserable lives to be near exiled dissidents. There are no dull stories here, just a couple that are confusing, and most are very good. Novices might prefer to read *The Very Best of...* first, but, if not, they'll still enjoy this.



THE FOLDED MAN

Matt Hill

Sandstone Press pb, 230pp, £8.99

Paul F. Cockburn

Near-future dystopian visions aren't exactly new. That said, Matt Hill's debut novel stands out from the rest thanks to its staccato prose, its Manchester setting and the authorial choice of a depressed wheelchair user called Brian Meredith as our way in this world. It's just a minor disappointment that the publisher insists on describing *The Folded Man* as "satire" rather than risk the apparent space-squid connotations of "science fiction". Which, given its playing with parallel universes, bodily transformation and a hero who thinks he's a mermaid, it most certainly is.

Of course, in a 21st century where technology and science is woven so deeply into the very fabric of our world and culture, you can argue that any fiction worth its sodium chloride is science fiction by default, and it's clear that author Matt Hill knows this. His vision of a war-torn, near-future Britain being ripped apart by nationalism, racism and a collapse of technology is, to quote from the novel, "as sharp on the eyes as any broken bottle". Like any good SF author,

Hill is picking up on current anxieties – about riots, acts of terror and a collapsing economy – and using them to extrapolate a world that could very well be with us in five years time if we're not careful. And, like any good author, he's doing so in a way that grabs and holds on to his readers' attention.

Not that *The Folded Man* is necessary easy reading. Our central character – who is generally too unsociable, too passive, too pushed around by events to be justifiably called a "protagonist" – has a congenital condition that causes his legs to fuse together, and his skin to go scale-like. Brian's daily routine is one of dullness and soul-sapping self-loathing, salvaged through a combination of self-mythologising (about mermaids, and the strength that comes from eating his own hair), drug use, and the very occasional dalliance with prostitutes in a seedy downtown brothel.

That a reader can have any sympathy, if not love, for Brian is down to his occasional moments of unexpected charm and, of course, Hill's Palahniukian minimalism as a writer. "Brian's in his chair – the wheelchair in the middle of his world. All days are the same. All days, every hour – trapped. The fat man in his yawning city. Ageing. Smoking and sleeping between damp walls and under bare bulbs. The fat man who sat through power cuts and water shortages. Listened to new riots and masked radicals on his telly. The same chair at the arse-end of Manchester, old capital of the north. The cold city, the blinking city."

This is undoubtedly a memorable debut with pathos, dark humour and true heart; some pretty nasty and memorable characters too, it must be said, even if one is "a pretend mobster in a shipping container with flaking paint and creeping rust. Over the

moors, the wrong side of Sheffield. A bad world going worse."

So why doesn't *The Folded Man* quite work for me? Why was I ultimately relieved to have finished reading the novel, rather than sad that it was all over?

It's not that the world of *The Folded Man* is too macabre, too much a playground for the worst excesses of human tribalism. Yes, there's an authorial willingness not to fade to black when things get nasty for Brian, but there's ripe dialogue to enjoy, an enveloping atmosphere that pulls you in. Hill succinctly creates a sensually rich and meaningful world, broken though it might be, which nevertheless draws you in: "Home again, where no hearts live."

No, it's more down to a feeling that the narrative doesn't quite hold together; that the world Hill has created is more important to him than what's happening in it. All too often, *The Folded Man* feels like a collection of dislocated scenes tumbling over each other in their haste to gain our attention, rather than dutifully play their role in a focused storyline. Not only that, there's also one hell of a gratuitous – and yet frustratingly opaque – exposition scene dropped, unsatisfactorily, from the sky near the close.

Or, to put it another way, while the surface prose is muscular and near-perfect – at times, it's delightfully maniacal poetry – the skeleton and muscles underneath the skin of *The Folded Man* are just not quite working properly. A bit like Brian, unfortunately.

Given that, *The Folded Man* is still an auspicious and intriguing debut, which promises much from the author. Matt Hill is definitely an author to keep an eye on in the future. It's just that, on this occasion and at the risk of paraphrasing one of Brian's mother's own expressions, chances are you'll love this novel in spite of this novel.



ACROSS THE EVENT HORIZON

Mercurio D. Rivera

NewCon Press hb, 272pp, £20.99

Matthew S. Dent

When I was a fresh-faced pup, new to the beckoning worlds of science fiction and their siren calls of “what if?”, one of the first stories I chanced upon was in TTA’s own *Transmissions From Beyond* podcast: a little tale entitled ‘The Scent of Their Arrival’ by a wordsmith called Mercurio D. Rivera.

It clearly had some sort of impact, given that I’m still devouring any and all speculative fiction with the gleeful gratitude of a starving man given a pasty. So it shouldn’t really surprise anyone that I jumped at the chance to read and review Rivera’s short story collection.

Across the Event Horizon treats us to fourteen stories (and a short introduction by Terry Bisson), taking us on a journey across the universe and beyond. All of them have a profound basis in human (or non-human) relationships, and they have a unifying theme of questioning who we are and what our place in the universe is – on both as individuals and a species.

I haven’t the space to analyse every story – although I easily could – so I will focus instead on a selected few. And given my own relationship with Rivera’s stories, it makes sense to start with ‘The Scent of Their Arrival’.

It was somewhat strange to be rereading and rediscovering this story after so long – which is something that many readers will find, as a not inconsiderable number of these stories were first published on these vaunted pages (and one in *Interzone*’s sister magazine *Black Static*). But it had lost none of its potency, the vivid way that Rivera conceives and then relates of such a radically different species and the concurrent communications issues, and then blends it with a strain of pure horror to leave a conclusion ripe and heavy with foreboding.

‘Longing for Langelana’ is another highlight of the collection. A story told over a lifetime, heavy with unrequited love and dreams of what may have been. It exemplifies Rivera’s storytelling that the full message of ‘Longing for Langelana’ is told over multiple levels. The threads of the characters’ personal relationships are part of a patchwork of a bigger relationship between humanity and the Wergen. The feelings of individuals within the story are insignificant in scale, and yet integral to the whole.

‘Bargonns Can Swizzle’ is one story which I wished more could have been made of. Beneath the delightful whimsy of the almost Whovian title lurks the story of an internet relationship over such scales of distance that the radical differences come across as sweet. But I would have welcomed more explanation of the differences between humanity and post-humanity, differences which lurked under the surface, and which I feel a longer piece would

have given Rivera the chance to explore.

‘Dear Annabehls’ and ‘Snatch Me Another’, however, are exactly what I look for in science fiction. Radical ideas, approached through innovative form. They are so intricately interlinked that I can’t really analyse them separately. ‘Snatch Me Another’ sets up the idea of infinite realities and the ability to ‘snatch’ items – and even people – from neighbouring universes at will. And hot on its heels, ‘Dear Annabehls’ explores the resultant dissolution of the boundaries between them through the medium of an agony aunt. It’s impressive, it’s imaginative, and it takes the story to its fascinating conclusion in a way which had me wishing more stories were written like this.

Speaking of boundary-pushing ideas, ‘Dance of the Kawkawroons’ is one of the best colonisation-themed stories I can recall having read. As a pair of explorers discover an alien species with remarkable properties, the resulting ‘exploitation’ is disturbing in of itself – but not half as disturbing as the final suggestion of turning the tables.

Finally, ‘Tu Sufrimiento Shall Protect Us’ is a completely different beast of a story. Set in a semi-post-apocalyptic near-future, this is a story steeped in Dominican culture, and the accordant superstitions. For a story which starts off decidedly odd, it takes a stark route into the darkest recesses of human nature, exploring how much we are willing to do to keep us and ours safe.

This is a collection to read and read again. Rivera is blessed with a sharp pen and a sharper mind, and the themes and ideas which he chooses to explore are always thrilling, and are handled with a deft and adventurous wit which is a pleasure to read.



SLÁINE: THE GRAIL WAR

Pat Mills, Nick Percival & Steve Tappin

Rebellion tpb, 176 pp, £17.99

Tony Lee

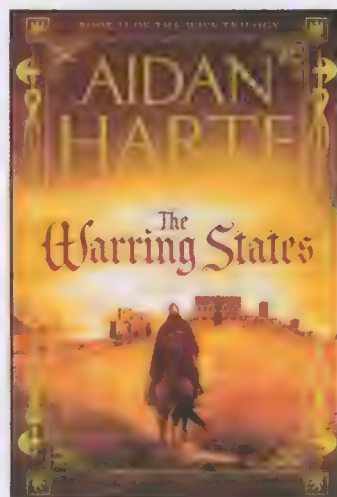
More than just a Celtic variation of Conan, heroic barbarian Sláine Mac Roth is a peculiarly Irish champion, inspired by mythological warrior Cú Chulainn, complete with his warp-spasm transformations during pitched battles into a Hulk-like super-beast. This collection of 2000AD stories dates from the late 1990s, but concludes with an extra tale, 'The Battle of Clontarf', originally published in 1985. The book begins with 'The Demon Hitch-Hiker', which is only a brief stopover on our post-punk hero's journey, but a character sketch that serves as an effective introduction to this fantasy world for new readers, and establishes Sláine's love/hate relationship with his untrustworthy dwarf sidekick Ukko.

Typically unstoppable rather than being invincible, Sláine is cast as an underdog hero for every medieval century, teaming up with Scots guardian William Wallace against English invaders in the seven-parter 'King of Hearts', a series which benefits from the tremendously dark style of Nick Per-

cival's painterly art. 'The Grail War' and narrative sequel 'Secret of the Grail' form the core of this book, with patchy artwork (by Steve Tappin) that veers from children's storybook pastels and some brooding gothicism, to single-colour page washes and monochrome strips (for flashbacks). A few odd panels exhibit a highly textured and nearly photographic realism, while too many others look like unfinished roughs. This is an interesting mix at first, but it becomes jarring.

'The Grail War' starts with Sláine and Marian in the Greenwood, and soon re-frames Sláine's eternal quest for his lost soul-mate Niamh with an unrequited romance, when her soul is apparently reincarnated in French noble Simon de Montfort, who is leading a crusading war against Catharism. This is all deeply embarrassing for our macho hero, especially as Montfort is known as the Dominator, and so Ukko gleefully makes the most of every opportunity for non-PC gay-bashing quips, despite the risks of receiving another in a reportedly long line of beatings from his sexually frustrated master.

The comedic aspects of *Sláine* must not be overlooked. Indeed, sometimes he seems less like a hero than a suitable subject for a bobble-head doll. And his creator Pat Mills ensures that Sláine is often the butt of throwaway jokes, as if to undermine this pagan saga's tendency to explore portentous themes. There's no doubt that Sláine is an extremely dangerous combatant. His favoured weapon is a battle-axe named Brain-biter, and it "isn't very good at glancing blows". However, his bad dreams include fighting hideous demons while he's perched naked on a giant sword bridge, so it's clear that he has some unresolved psychological issues, written from a perspective of amusement about hyper-masculine stereotypes.



THE WARRING STATES

Aidan Harte

Jo Fletcher Books hb, 498pp, £20

Lawrence Osborn

The Warring States is the second volume of Aidan Harte's Wave Trilogy. Its predecessor, *Irenicon*, was a very accomplished debut novel and one of the most memorable books of 2012. I have been waiting impatiently for the next instalment, and Harte has not disappointed me. There are several important continuities between the volumes, which ensure that *The Warring States* is as satisfying as *Irenicon*. For a start there is the same engaging prose. Then there is the complex world-building: he continues to develop his fascinating, and at times disturbing, riff on Renaissance Italy while adding into the mix his own take on Byzantium and the Kingdom of Acre. A much bigger picture is gradually unfolding, and this gives Harte a larger canvas for his vivid descriptions: there are new cities to explore, and the dangers of the Middle Sea and the Desert of Oltremare to be braved.

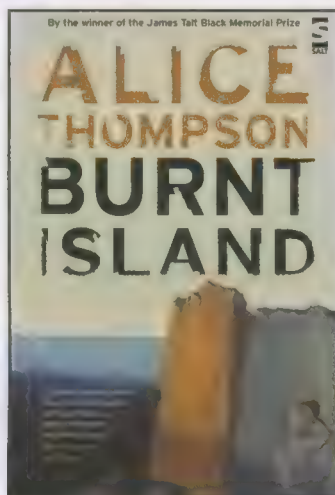
This episode begins with the back stories of Torbidda, a Concordian boy who rises to become First Apprentice of Concord in the

wake of the events in *Irenicon*, and Leto, Torbidda's ally who becomes the head of Concord's armed forces. Harte's ability to develop complex and convincing characters is worth mentioning here. With Torbidda, he has achieved the very difficult feat of depicting how Concord's education system turns him into a cold-blooded murderer while portraying him as sympathetic. Part II picks up the story of Sofia Scaligeri, the central character of *Irenicon*, and traces her flight from Rasenna. At the same time, he weaves into Sofia's story the parallel story of Torbidda's struggles to retain control of Concord, to understand the truth of the Molè, the sinister building that dominates Concord, and to resist the Molè's efforts to manipulate and possess him.

Harte also begins to develop hints from *Irenicon* that this is part of a much bigger cosmological conflict. It appears that Sofia's unborn son has a messianic role to play and that the child's ancient adversary is also seeking to be reborn and is manipulating world events to achieve final victory.

Having said that this new volume didn't disappoint, I should mention one or two caveats. This is very much the second volume of a trilogy: *Irenicon* is essential reading if you wish to understand what is going on. Also, *The Warring States* feels inconclusive: story arcs are left hanging in mid-air rather than being given any kind of interim resolution. Taken together with a cliffhanger ending, I found this more than a little annoying. Unusually, I am prepared to forgive this and give the book a qualified recommendation because of Harte's accomplished use of language, his clever and complex world-building, and his very satisfying characterisation.

In sum, if you enjoyed *Irenicon*, you will certainly want to read *The Warring States*.



BURNT ISLAND

Alice Thompson

Salt Publishing pb, 224pp, £8.99

Andy Hedgecock

Jorge Luis Borges wrote: "That imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality." Alice Thompson's sixth novel, *Burnt Island*, riffs on Borges' theme by presenting competing realities and teetering on the verge of revelation from the first page to the last. Its metaphysical profundity is appropriately Borgesian, and its elegant prose style and chilling atmosphere make for an exhilarating read.

I'm not a fan of books focussing on the demands of the creative process and the angst of writers, but Thompson's tale is liberated from dreary self-absorption by its deeply disconcerting imagery, its deftly realised sense of isolation, its unsettling eroticism and the elegant games it plays with the tropes of traditional horror fiction.

Max Long, a writer of literary fiction is riddled with self-doubt. His marriage has ended, his relationship with his son is deeply flawed and he's failed to find an audience for his seven literary novels. A fellowship funded by a mysterious benefactor takes

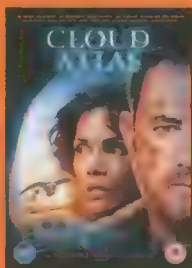
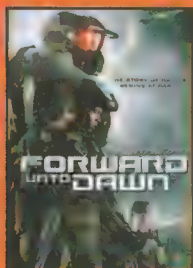
Max to the bleak, mysterious and windswept Atlantic community of Burnt Island. Here he meets the wealthy and reclusive blockbuster author James Fairfax.

Max moves into Fairfax's home, a symphony in glass with Atlantic views, and decides to capitulate to market forces by writing a bestseller in the horror genre. But his quest for wealth and acclaim is undermined by worldly temptations and unworldly horrors. There's an apparent, and apparently reciprocated, attraction to the island GP, but this is superseded by an erotic obsession with Fairfax's daughter, Rose. Then Max experiences a series of disturbing visions of bird attacks, fleetingly observed figures, doppelgängers and corpses.

There's a strange and mute child who may hold the key to some of the island's mysteries, not least the curious disappearance of both Fairfax's wife Natalie and a writer called Daniel, a previous beneficiary of Fairfax's hospitality. Max finds a manuscript by Daniel almost identical to one of Fairfax's own novels and is consumed by a frenzy of suspicion, fear and envy.

Max's alarming visions seem to be tied to the book he is trying to write. Sex is mired in images of death. Faceless figures reflect doubts about the identity of rivals and lovers. Shifts in perception reflect not only Max's uncertain intention in creating his putatively 'popular' genre story, but also the highly provisional nature of the fiction conjured by Alice Thompson herself. That both stories have the title *Burnt Island* heightens the sense of a narrative crammed with strange loops and paradoxes.

Burnt Island is subtle, compelling, strange and clever. It is not, however, an arid meta-fictional thought experiment: there's something entirely visceral about its erotic tension, terror and sense of inevitable and overwhelming loss.



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review for
more details



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

HALO 4: FORWARD
UNTO DAWN

CLOUD ATLAS

OZ THE GREAT
AND POWERFUL

FALLING SKIES
SEASON TWO

ROBOT & FRANK

SCREAM AND
SCREAM AGAIN

DEVIL GIRL FROM MARS

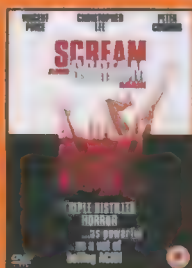
THE INVISIBLE MAN

QUEST FOR FIRE



Movies like *Aliens* and *Starship Troopers* inspired (if that's the right word) unrelated products, including lucrative video game franchises in the first-person-shooter mode. If, like me, you aren't a gamer, then **HALO 4: FORWARD UNTO DAWN** (Blu-ray/DVD, 27 May) may have limited appeal. Its five (15-minute) web episodes are edited into a movie for this release, which appears to be part of a campaign favouring a big-budget cinema version. Centred on space marine cadet Lasky, this references Roman history and military studies, but lacks any consistency when it comes to such basic things as returning a salute. While Lasky and his mixed team are in training to fight in the war against insurrectionists, *Halo 4* is clearly aiming to evoke a future world's *Full Metal Jacket* but it lacks the solid characterisation that distinguished Kubrick's classic, and its slick TV styling, in our *BSG* remake era, neglects any serious anti-war message. It's also at pains to avoid the acutely satirical influence of Verhoeven's take on Heinlein.

Its highest level – well, its only level – of success as an action movie is its visual effects, which cheaply but adequately dramatise/depict a surprise attack by the ships and infantry of monstrous aliens, armoured creature cousins of hunting squads from the *Predator* franchise. There is overuse of slow-motion, and the routinely anthemic score. The kids are rescued from a blitz by a lone cyborg soldier, stomping about like RoboCop. As the base commander, Ayelet Zurer (*Angels & Demons*, *Man of Steel*) is the only believable performer, but Anna Popplewell (*The Chronicles of Narnia*) does what she can with her own underwritten role as a tragic heroine. *Halo 4* is not, I must admit, an entirely bad example of militaristic sci-fi in the media, but *Space: Above and Beyond* and Andrzej Bartkowiak's *Doom* remain far better entertainment.



Oddly intriguing and sometimes fascinating but ultimately quite frustrating, **CLOUD ATLAS** (DVD/Blu-ray, 1 July) is directed by Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*), with Lana – formerly Larry – and Andy Wachowski forming a separate crew. Based upon the novel (that I have not read) by David Mitchell, it reaches from the hidden mind to the outré limits, exploring the chronoplex destinies of individuals – all bearing the same comet birthmark – via six stories set in different eras. Revealed in fragments, these include a comedic 1970s conspiracy with Tarantinoesque blaxploitation gags, a post-holocaust island of tribal cannibalism and technocratic survivalists, a farce about escapees from a British old folks' home, and the fate of a 22nd century Korean 'disposable' waitress rescued from enslavement. It cobbles together vanilla sci-fi thrills with philosophical banalities about how an invisible touch of crimes and kindness lingers, to gain weight affecting unpredictably dark futures where obedience to corporate emblems on bright soaring towers has entirely replaced nationalistic enthusiasm for coloured rags up the flagpole

of patriotism. Under rules of social Darwinism, cannibalism is the last taboo, and *Cloud Atlas* deploys, repetitively, the dilemma of unethical recycling, copied from the infamous final revelation of *Soylent Green*, with grisly sincerity about that amoral mentality.

Yet it gathers portentous blathering: on spontaneous creative sparks, finding a reliable muse, some bleak introspection or nostalgic reverie, inspiration derived from limitless hope, and quaint little fables about how truth can wreck beliefs. There's a lot going on here, but the glass is not half full, or half empty, it is cracked and leaking. At its heart is a musical composition, a 'Cloud Atlas' symphony, that somehow resonates across/transcends time periods – from historical to futuristic – that provide multiple roles for the main cast (Jim Broadbent is the best of them in repertory theatre mode) in a quirkily novelistic quantum reality concocted by trippy grey convolutions of imaginative thinking round narrative corners. Can you cog the true-true of it now?

It's an epic but rambling effort and, this being a Wachowskis opus, the makers cannot resist inserting some gratuitous cyberpunk action scenes (much like *Casshern* or *Natural City*), with a rebel hero on the loose in the spectacular Asian megalopolis. You might like bits of it, but I doubt many viewers will agree on exactly which bits are good and which are not. Perhaps, as befitting its myth

of irregularities, *Cloud Atlas* is most genuinely 'entertaining' (in anticipation) before seeing it, then again (overall, in contemplation) after viewing. Such is the indie blockbuster conceit of this ambitiously cross-genre TykWacho formulation that its trick also works a second time round, and will possibly repeat its engrossing, curiously adolescent ADHD appeal for a third or fourth play too. It does not offer enlightenment but it is an uplifting movie.

The most profound influence upon *Cloud Atlas* is Terry Gilliam. Although rejecting his oeuvre's delightful flights of whimsy, a greater sense of realism in *Cloud Atlas* is woven tightly around a core of urgent romanticism that's very Gilliamesque in tone. Think of *Time Bandits*, *Brazil*, and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* in particular (but also of *12 Monkeys* and *The Fisher King*), and the cumulative impact of Gilliam's storyteller idiom and ironic humour, on this paradigm of acutely cinematic expression, becomes clear. Whatever positive/negative comments you may have read/heard about *Cloud Atlas*, I strongly suggest that you give it a try. Yes, it's a 'message movie', but you have nothing to lose...except three precious hours of your life.

We have 5 Blu-rays to give away. Email your name and address to cloudatlas@ttopress.com before the closing date of July 31st.



"Are you going to save us all, or not?" **OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL** (Blu-ray/DVD, 1 July) is a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz* and, most curious of contradictions, a Disney product directed by Sam Raimi. Vaudeville magician Oscar (James Franco, *Spider-Man* trilogy) flees his carnival troubles and leaves Kansas via hot-air balloon. Caught in a tornado, he lands in a magical dreamland, just as the 20-minute prologue (quite pretentiously shot in 4:3 ratio b&w) switches to widescreen format and vivid colour. Oscar meets three witches, portrayed with variable degrees of charm and menace by Mila Kunis, Rachel Weisz and Michelle Williams. Mistaken for the wizard Oz, Oscar hits the yellow bricks and, just down the road, he's eager, if not really able, to take up residence in the Emerald City. First, there is a confrontational test for him to pass.

Clearly obsessed with origin stories and their re-visioning, Hollywood imposes postmodern values on its fairy tales, and this gaudy treatment of Baum's

classic is no exception (although Nick Willing's witty mini-series *Tin Man* was much better in that regard). The CG characters include Finley the flying-monkey sidekick, and a broken/repaiored China doll (a Dorothy sub) in search of a family. There's a witch hunt in the dark forest, soap-bubble transports, giant crystals, animated flowers, and the horror of singing munchkins. As expected, the main plot concerns the redemption of a con-man into a good-natured yet reluctant hero; in contrast to the corruption of a betrayed innocent girl into green-faced malevolence, cackling with traditional panto evil on her broomstick. After the wizard's artful trickster displays, inspired by Edison, the final battle for the city's throne is between the light and dark witches. This movie is watchable and boasts occasionally very enjoyable scenes, despite the predictability of what goes on behind the curtain. This Blu-ray presentation makes the most of the visual style, married to Danny Elfman's archly contrived music. A sequel is foretold.



The reptilian/'fish-head' overlords behind robo-troopers and skittery creatures make their presence felt by invading psychic dreams, just as they stalk human resistance in conquered territories. Swaggering machismo conflicts with a rationality of apparently enslaved skitters during attempts to form their alliance with humans against the giant overlords' oppression. New creatures – like burrowing bugs – appear during a hospital siege before the '2nd Mass' of survivors start a new journey to Charleston, where their reputation precedes them...

I reviewed season one for *Interzone* #241. **FALLING SKIES SEASON TWO** (DVD, 8 July) begins with widespread suspicions about freed captive Tom, as doubts fester in groups of survivors in this dangerous world where secrets are fatally divisive, and paranoia emerges too easily enough from tensions over split loyalties between family and gangs, never mind legitimate concerns about the 'trustworthiness' of a shattered individual after release from brain-washed control. The trouble with this is that such people problems and moral dilemmas are rarely science fictional in nature

and often seem borrowed from standard non-genre warfare or espionage scenarios. Like many genre TV shows of late, this tends to steer away from SF while it ekes out any horrific shocks, so genre content is usually limited – on average – to one scientific explanation and/or gory scene per episode. Also like other sci-fi programming, the writers prefer to focus on the relationship stories and teen adventures that are supposed to appeal to their demographic target audience, thus satisfying a network demand for TV ratings.

Characters open up about their dark pasts but, typically, the revelations are dull, and also paradoxically unrealistic for this scenario. Because who cares about what a person did before civilisation collapsed? The 'keep calm and smile' preference is a banal reaction to the end of the world. But of course a high frequency of suicidal despair would be off-putting to mainstream TV viewers, yet plug-and-play sentimentality is acceptable. Merely recycling paltry ideas and foreseeable twists from similar alien invasion series turns *Falling Skies* into just another time-waster. A more intriguing element is the residual effects of a symbiotic process used to 'harness' slave labour, the upshot of which promotes telepathic bonding in former prisoners.

There is some improvement in the production values, but still a lot of room for better developments of the latent super-soldier formula. If only the character studies, of those faced with choosing between the freewill of liberty, and social responsibilities that come with belonging/sharing, were more nuanced and credible instead of just a mess of contrariness, pointless disagreements, and challenges to leadership, the show might be worthy of serious attention.



If Ray Bradbury had ever tried his hand at cyberpunk, the resultant crash of different styles might look something like **ROBOT & FRANK** (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 July). It is a first feature by screenwriter Christopher D. Ford and director Jake Schreier, and it wittily entertains with its near-future grounding in melancholic dementia and dysfunctional family relationships, corrected by a plastic domestic caregiver droid that faces up to a retiree's case of slip-away finality by presenting itself as nameless sacrificial innocent and faceless pragmatic saviour, of sorts.

Frank Langella plays convicted cat-burglar Frank, whose neglected son (James Marsden) and flighty daughter (Liv Tyler) fail to engage with him in lonely isolation. Belying its white goods appearance, the robot displays more understanding of Frank's needs than its charge's children. It is an appliance of supreme patience, indulging the old man's whims and steering his lapsed interest in life towards renewed purpose via gentle nudges instead of pushing and shoving. An effective personification of society's concerns about humane care for the elderly and infirm, the robot fulfils a certain type of utopian liberal thinking. And, Spielbergian/Asimovian anxieties about reliable A.I. aside, *Robot & Frank* posits a mildly Sladekian techno fable, adjacent to the *Twilight Zone* cyber-nanny episode *I Sing the Body Electric* and Noel Black's feature *Electric Grandmother*. All of these unacknowledged, let alone credited, riffs should be seen as necessarily tolerable, if not entirely acceptable, in a movie that is about theft, memory loss, and breaking the rules of genre drama.

This offers a perfectly charming tale of senescence interrupted, and housework drudgery problems solved, with a lightness of touch for its good humour and honesty. Troubled Frank is not saved by technology, but much that is of great benefit to him is soon accomplished by the addition of a robot butler to boost his waning lifestyle. Can I put in my order for a home helper just like this right now please?

MORE DVD/BLU-RAY REVIEWS

Tony also reviews many DVDs and Blu-rays for our sister magazine *Black Static*, covering twenty new releases in issue 35 (out now) from *The Man Who Haunted Himself* to *Maniac*, *Curandero: Dawn of the Demon* to *Stoker*. There are often chances to win copies of discs in easy to enter competitions.

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RETRONAUTICS

It is fairly common for SF movies to descend into climactic horror, but quite rare that a movie starting with a horror scenario twists/turns into something science fictional. **SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN** (DVD, 3 June) gets the balance just right with bizarre, convoluted plotting that wrongfoots our initial assumptions. The jumble of disparate concerns begins with a mysterious 'hospital', a man's traumatic loss of limbs, and the fascist conspiracy involving an east European state.

Psycho slasher murders in swinging London prompt an undercover operation to catch the serial killer, who appears to be a vampire. Vincent Price, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing provide marquee appeal/poster value only. The actual star of this offbeat crime thriller is Alfred Marks as the no-nonsense detective leading a manhunt and his performance anchors the brisk chase sequence (that pre-dates *The Sweeney*) out of the city into the Surrey countryside. The superhuman suspect escapes arrest but he is tracked to a mad scientist's house, where he jumps into a disposal tank of acid.

The clipped dialogue finds its subtleties in a confusion of terms – "Not artificial, let's say synthetic" – summing up the creation of matchless androids with a cybernaut-like death grip, used to eliminate opposition to the aforementioned conspiracy. SASA suggests that "In the future there will be no room for imperfection", and its climactic, violent intent involves a brain transplant, with a victim ready for surgery. A paranoiac nightmare, it is the sort of Brian Clemens-style twist made particularly fashionable by *The Avengers* TV series, but played commendably straight so that



SCREAM AND SCREAM AGAIN

even today it feels more like a dark political satire, somewhat akin to Lindsay Anderson's work, than just a sublime parody of British alien invasion movies such as John Gilling's *Night Caller*.

In the wake of that classic of alien visitation *The Day the Earth Stood Still* British sci-fi movies struggled to imitate Hollywood successfully, never mind compete with the major studios. Made in 1954, **DEVIL GIRL FROM MARS** (DVD, 10 June) mirrored Roger Corman's cheap 'n' cheerful approach, not the grandly ambitious productions of George Pal, and that was its failure as serious SF – but also the source of its quirky charm and inventive wit. It is based on a play and looks it too, with frequently static camera work and minimal editing. David MacDonald directs with a notable emphasis on ensemble performances and romantic melodrama. The localised doomsday plot is centred on a country inn, where, one busy night – involving an escaped convict and a professor in search of meteorites – is interrupted by the arrival of femme fatale Nyah (Patricia Laffan, *Quo Vadis*), whose dominatrix costume also pioneers the miniskirt.

The uncomplicated kitschy appeal of the surface theatrics is strengthened by a haughty alien's post-war sexual politics, concerning the red planet's population crisis (women rule over impotent men), and bolstered by character actors like professional-Scotsman John Laurie. Hammer horror queen Hazel Court brings very



DEVIL GIRL FROM MARS

English prim elegance to a pub siege enforced by an invisible wall of energy and a robot WMD. The crook who's in love with the barmaid (Adrienne Corri, later in *Moon Zero Two* and *A Clockwork Orange*) becomes a tragic hero. The end is Nyah!

Although a majority of critical assessments of this movie's silliness are honest, such reviews often unfairly neglect layers of dry humour (the Jamiesons are publican stereotypes, yet well observed nonetheless), the movie's chilling allusions to fairy tale glamour, a fascination with social isolation, and a contribution to paranoid UFOlogy subculture – so fearful of, yet secretly craving, alien abduction – in a scenario that was cleverly spoofed by Nigel Kneale's TV comedy *Kinvig* (1981). Yes, the walking-fridge robot is a laughable construct. But I always liked the Martian spaceship design, and its final destruction by sabotage offers one surprisingly good effects sequence for this particular era of low-budget productions.

Arguably the most curious and bizarre subject ever put on screen, invisibility remains a fascinating premise, whether it concerns a magical cloak, a stealthy starship, or **THE INVISIBLE MAN** (DVD, 8 July), a US TV show that gives the Wellsian original a spy-fi twist, harking back to *The Invisible Agent* (1942) and the fondly remembered British series of the late 1950s. After the plain-clothes superheroism of *The Champions* and *Six Million Dollar Man*, the field of genre television was ready for



THE INVISIBLE MAN

a no-clothes secret agent, created by Harve Bennett and Steven Bochco, and this helped establish a flexi-plate for popular prime time telefantasy like *Man From Atlantis*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and even *Airwolf*.

Physicist Daniel Westin (David McCallum) and wife Kate (Melinda Fee), also a research scientist, are contracted to work as "the Klæ resource" for a corporate think-tank which tackles 'unsolvable' problems. Turned permanently invisible, Dan wears a synthetic Dermaplex skin mask and gloves for his public appearances and strips off to vanish, and snoop, during undercover ops. There is witty genre scripting (even the lab rabbit is named Harvey). An invisible Dan tries for a tan and gets sunburnt. The show is not afraid of resorting to slapstick and farce. Fee is a real trouper in comedy scenes. Subjective camera work saves on effects shots. Wires are sometime visible, but editing tricks and mimed actions are often successful in creating the illusion of 'nothingness'.

Today, it's a winner as a solid retro product from simpler times when TV did not have to be so focused on trying to be cinematic in scope, or depended on the complexity of season-arc plotting. Episodic dramas used standard crime stories, with the invisibility factor adding a unique quality to common contemporary situations of hostage rescue, exposing corruption, thwarting blackmail, arranging a political defection, and helping ordinary people. However, in *Man of Influence*,



QUEST FOR FIRE

John Vernon plays a fake spiritualist whose con game is debunked by the Westins' double-act, and excellent psychological thriller *Power Play* guest stars Monte Markham (later to become Steve Austin's rival, the *Seven Million Dollar Man*) as escaped loony Pike, who is determined to discover the Klæ resource's secret. It's a suspenser with a primary subtext asking can anyone trust the power that they cannot see? The final episode's hospital siege is much like a *Mission: Impossible* idea but, unlike a typical IMF effort, there is no careful planning and everything is cleverly improvised by the heroes, including a classic *Invisible Man* image of a bandaged head being unwrapped.

Despite its tongue-in-cheek amusements, this TV series was the best version of invisibility, as SF theme, until Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2002). The short-lived show was followed by the equally brief series *Gemini Man* (1976), for which the hero enjoyed only limited periods of invisibility, timed by his 'magic' wristwatch. It was not until 1984 that a genuinely faithful adaptation of Wells' novel appeared, but that BBC production was certainly worth waiting for, and it remains a classic of period style SF drama. John Carpenter's semi-farce *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992) showcased outstanding effects work, and more recently the Sci-Fi Channel's watchable comedy-adventure *The Invisible Man* (2000–2) starred Vincent Ventresca as Darien Fawkes, a crook turned government agent. Lasting two full sea-

sons, it was the most successful live-action version of personal invisibility-via-biotech so far.

Although Michael Chapman's 1986 feature *The Clan of the Cave Bear* was a strong contender for the title, Jean-Jacques Annaud's **QUEST FOR FIRE** (Blu-ray, 5 August) is still the best movie about prehistoric man, thanks to its stunning landscapes (shot in Canada, Scotland and Kenya) and frequently astonishing performances from then-burgeoning stars Ron Perlman (*Hellboy*), Everett McGill (*Dune*), and especially Rae Dawn Chong (*Commando*). The leads are uncannily convincing and wittily engaging as characters whether under special make-up or performing their own stunts. With a primitive language created by Anthony Burgess, and tribal attacks upon our heroes by less advanced hominids, this can rightly be viewed as bona fide science fiction, unlike the more blatant fantasy/monster movies that have formed the bulk of cinema about cavemen.

With its Neanderthals, woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed big cats, this is a great adventure trek across Palaeolithic Europe. However, the superb drama balances the pitiless horrors of cannibalism with plenty of good humour – this is a movie about learning how to laugh, as well as starting a campfire – that is as much concerned with making the ragged and hapless wretches more sympathetic, as it's clearly intent upon making fun of their tragic behaviour, often by veering into slapstick scenes or some quite hilarious black comedy. Extras on this hi-def edition are the same as on Second Sight's previous DVD release.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

MAN OF STEEL

STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS

WORLD WAR Z

AFTER EARTH

THIS IS THE END

THE PURGE

BYZANTIUM

EPIC

DESPICABLE ME 2

ROBOSAPIEN



MAN OF STEEL

Jerry Siegel didn't talk about his father. The story of what happened to Mitchell Siegel didn't begin to come out till Gerard Jones' 2004 history *Men of Tomorrow*, still the most important book ever written about comics, which drew on family interviews to reveal that the creator of the modern superhero was driven by his own Bruce Wayne backstory, his father killed in a robbery at his convenience store by gunshot or heart attack (family memory varies) and the Joe Chill perpetrator never caught. For the teenage Jerry, a lifetime of unevenly channelled anger, loss, and fantasies of impossible redress would manifest in two extended spasms of genius at DC (1938–46 and 1959–67) and an implacable sense of grievance at the theft of his paternity that would boil over repeatedly in his quest for restitution over the rights to his iconic creation.

Jerry was understandably angry at a lot of things, and would probably have been fairly cross with **MAN OF STEEL**, which makes some truly inexcusable choices in its pursuit of stakes proportionate to the weight of its subject. But he would at least have had to acknowledge the film's fidelity to the religious and familial resonances of the myth he created, in its frank presentation of Krypton's last son as a full-on space Jesus with two dead dads; and many of the Nolan-Goyer choices can be respected if not admired. Henry Cavill looks great, if awfully earnest, and stacks up surprisingly well against Christopher Reeve in a contest

that was only ever going to have one winner. The Nolanisation of the Smallville backstory into a non-linear series of flashbacks circumvents the major problem of Donner's first film, the wearisome most-of-an-hour before Reeve shows up for work. To show something of Krypton as a living world was an idea all lovers of the house of El would get behind, even if the film's execution falls largely short aside from some occasional flashes of brilliance in production design like the pleasingly incomprehensible Phantom Zone projector. The significance of Superman's coming as a tale of first contact, and of Zod's as a genocidal colonial war, is allowed to carry its full, massive force; and nobody could accuse Snyder's film of stinting on Siegel's messianic mythopoetics as Kal-El grapples with his dual identity as god and man, our saviour and our terror. Above all, it's a film that distills what Superman meant for Jerry Siegel as a hero driven by loss, prematurely bereft of the celestial father he never knew and the terrestrial one who died to keep him safe. Here's dead dad one (to Lara's "He'll be an outcast, a freak; they'll kill him."): "How? He'll be a god to them." And in his extended role as interactive game-hints ghost: "They won't necessarily make the same mistakes we did, not if you guide them, Kal ... In time they will join you in the sun, Kal. In time you will help them accomplish wonders." Dad two: "It's going to change everything: our beliefs, what it means to be human, when the world finds out what you can



STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS

do ... You were sent here for a reason" [that one twice, in close succession] "... You got to decide what kind of man you want to be, Clark, because whoever that man is, he's going to change the world."

Nevertheless, it's a hard film to fall in love with, even before the four-quadrants-wrong resolution to the Kal/Zod showdown – which manages to be simultaneously horrifying to fans and absurdly bathetic to anyone else. There's some truly terrible plot-cobbling (the phantom drive, the Codex, the world-engine), and a predictable excess of Zack Snyder's least lovely action tics. The postponement of Clark's career with the *Daily Planet* is inoffensive in itself, but leaves Perry White and team entirely disconnected from his story and demoted to thankless appendages to Lois'. Before the leaked "Treatment 4.5B" was revealed as a fake, it was briefly possible to believe that Nolan and Goyer had made their choices for thoughtful reasons; that the collateral casualties, the violation of Kal-El's respect for the Comics Code, and the resemblance of the plot to a lazy composite of *Transformers* films had been arrived at by the deeply pondered rejection of easy alternatives. But it seems not so, and while a sequel could still deliver a *Dark Knight* from this beginning, it would surely be unwise to hope. Warners are nervous while Marvel are five years further down the road and brimming with creative and investor confidence. At the very least it would take a surge of unprecedented boldness for a

Justice League to happen any time soon, or at all.

Some of *Man of Steel*'s take on Clark Kent's tussle with his destiny was anticipated in J.J. Abrams' mercifully unmade 2002 *Superman: Flyby*; and as *Man of Steel* riffs knowingly on the original Salkind–Donner–Lester two-parter, so Abrams' **STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS** plays changes on *Wrath of Khan* in an absolutely baffling plot which revels in its paracanonical deviations and recombinations. The Abrams alternate Trekverse seems to be conceived as a chaotic probability space whose divergent narrative possibilities inexorably converge on the canon attractors of the *Enterprise* crew and their assorted narrative adjuncts – here tested by an extended initial shuffling of the deck through sackings, suspensions, transfers and secondments to shake the canon roles up before everyone settles back into their allotted places for the five-year mission. From manic opening to shouty dangly plummety climax, it's a film that badly wants to excite us – rather missing the point of the original *Trek*, which was never as much about the action as it was about the boldly going. Abrams' writers struggle with this, despite Chris Pine's Kirk now being a better performance of Shatner's Kirk than Shatner delivered himself, and Zachary Quinto's Spock awarded motivational conundrums of transVulcanian actorliness: "I owe it to you not to mistake my choice not to feel for not caring, when the truth is quite



WORLD WAR Z

the opposite." But such affection for the original performances is weirdly displaced in the handling of the villain, where after Benicio del Toro turned down Khan Noonien Singh they've gone instead for a posh and pasty English thespian who performs under the name "John Harrison". No wonder we didn't recognise him.

The new-*Trek* writing team of Orci and Kurtzman has recruited Damon Lindelof for *Into Darkness*, following a happy-for-them experience on the not-so-much-for-us *Cowboys & Aliens*. There are some for whom Lindelof's name on a film is the screenplay credit of death, after an unenviable series of emergency interventions in variously floundering projects which proved beyond the powers of any involved to restore to full health: most recently *Prometheus*, but most dramatically now **WORLD WAR Z**. In truth, though, this is a film that was never not in trouble, from the moment Brad Pitt bought the rights to a Studs Terkel pastiche with no hero, no plot, and no favoured locations, and consisting principally of unaffordable set pieces scattered across the globe and told entirely in flashback. The best material in Max Brooks' novel wasn't actually the larger geopolitical narrative of war with the undead which attracted Brad to the project, but the anthology of inventive short stories embedded in its interviews, none of which has made it into the film. J. Michael Straczynski's original drafts were the last to look anything much like the book,



AFTER EARTH

as subsequent writers turned the pointedly passive and anonymous reporter into a butt-kicking UN field investigator (is that even a real job?) and tossed him into the thick of the action as the one-man-making-a-difference that the novel so determinedly resisted. So now Brad leaves the family behind to spend the film jetting from one hot-zone crisis set piece to another on behalf of the UN, for all the world like a fantasy version of Angelina, in a rambling storyline that seems to have had its brains eaten by the undead. Why does the UN need Brad to hop perilously back and forth between continents to talk to people who have perfectly good working satellite phones? How can the virus continue to spread via the airlines ("the perfect delivery system") with the novel's zombie turn-time of hours reduced to a snappier twelve seconds? The showcase set pieces (Philly, Jerusalem, zombies on a plane) are suitably spectacular, but Lindelof and Drew Goddard's rescue mission leaves it looking as if like a different film has been glued on to the stump of the one originally shot, which is exactly what has happened – this being the first studio tentpole to replace a gigantic third-act battle climax (an epic Russian-set zombie Waterloo) with a much cheaper reshoot, in which Brad instead now spends an interminable half-hour creeping round corridors somewhere in Glamorgan, while interest in Brad's family back home, which starts out the main thing, comes and goes at the end



THIS IS THE END

of a phoneline and finally gets interned in a resettlement camp in Nova Scotia for running out of point. Commercially, it seems on track to pay off; but it's a shame that an adventurously unfilmable book has ended up merely as a much more expensive and much less exciting instalment of *Resident Evil*.

Another star-built family enterprise makes an uncomfortable forced landing in **AFTER EARTH**, M. Night Shyamalan's extravagantly staged two-hander for Will and Jaden Smith as spacewrecked survivors on a bioweaponised Earth. After a couple of duds in *Lady in the Water* and *The Happening*, Night's last films from his own increasingly wonky material, Night has turned hired hand on others' more lavishly budgeted projects to no greater acclaim, and now follows the epicly bonkers *Last Airbender* with a coming-of-age vehicle aimed at launching the younger Smith as a teen star in his own right. Meanwhile Smith senior plays against type and charm as a humourless warrior who breaks his leg in the first act and has to phone in the rest of his performance from a sitting position while junior becomes his game avatar in a first-person quest through the perilous wood to activate the rescue beacon. As brilliant a director as he is a consistently terrible writer, Night is inauspiciously working here from a story by the elder Smith, which was initially written up by *Book of Eli*'s Gary Whitta before Night and uncredited others (bizarrely



THE PURGE

including Kathryn Bigelow's writer Mark Boal) took their turns. Though the alleged Scientological resonances have probably been exaggerated, the dialogue is all too often worthy of the Commodore himself ("The only place fear can exist is in our thoughts of the future"), and the whole scenario displays actor-quality levels of regard for reason. Shyamalan comes out of it surprisingly well, but the same can't be said for his leads, whose ambitions for a narrative meld of *Moby-Dick* with *Scouting for Boys* fare no better than you'd imagine.

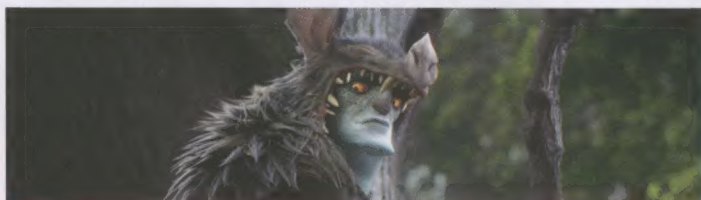
THIS IS THE END takes us on a comedy trek among the stars as Jay Baruchel and Seth Rogen, playing heavily fictionalised versions of their celebrity selves, find themselves holed up in James Franco's house with Jonah Hill, Craig Robinson, and an enthusiastically appalling Danny McBride when the Apocalypse of St John hits LA and those who aren't beamed up in the Rapture or swallowed in the pit are trapped in an apocalyptic Beast-haunted limbo between redemption and damnation till their moral compass swings one way or the other. A work of calibrated fantasy from the outset, it presents us with a made-up version of Hollywood where actors are extensions of their screen persona, only more stoned and narcissistic, and mysteriously unencumbered by entourages or attachments. The first twenty minutes are tightly written and crafted with deadpan assurance, setting up Canadian



BYZANTIUM

outsiders Baruchel and Rogen as back-home besties divided by their contrasting tolerances of L.A., and the plot as one of the apocalypse bringing people closer together. But after a promising first act where it briefly seems like the end of days for the comedy rulebook, the film goes into lockdown as our six feckless plonkers perform off one another in the confined space of Franco's party room to demonic noises off, before the cg budget is unlocked at last for a final judgment sequence in which the survivors negotiate the game-theoretical maze of sacrifice plays that will send them finally skywards or hellbound, and the redemptive power of buddy love sends the winners to a never-ending party in heaven. Amusing touches of bizarre celebrity satire give it intermittent pop, but it never quite becomes the film its early setups promise; and a sequence where a very stoned Franco and Rogen brainstorm a sequel to *Pineapple Express* gives an artfully uncomfortable impression of authenticity.

Another housebound horror-siege unfolds in Michael Bay-produced **THE PURGE**, a mounting preposterous thought experiment which begins by asking us to swallow the premise that suspending all law for one night a year would not only lead to a crash in crime the rest of the year, but somehow also save the economy and restore 99% employment. For the first half-hour, as Ethan Hawke and family batten down under the protection of the proprietary



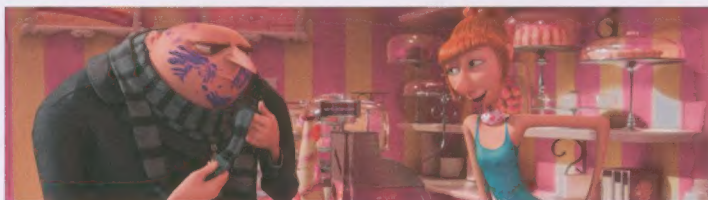
EPIC

security systems that have made dad the money to afford them, the film builds a tremendously effective sense of things about to go very horribly wrong and of home-invasion paranoia mixing with handgun-toting domestic jitters and undeclared class warfare in a toxic cocktail of all-American fears. But the moment the clock starts on the Purge and lockdown itself, the film founders in a chain of dopey decisions and sheerly incredible plot turns that slash away the slim cords by which disbelief is suspended, as well as cheerfully undermining its liberal satire with an apparent message that America will be safe so long as you tool up your daughters, forbid them boyfriends, and on no account let the underclass into your home.

Neil Jordan's quirky Irish vampire fantasy **BYZANTIUM** follows enigmatic bloodsucking duo Gemma Arterton and Saoirse Ronan through a crisis that threatens to pull their centuries-old blood-bond apart as Ronan hooks up with haemophiliac Caleb Landry Jones (who as in *Antiviral* is absolutely your man if you want an actor who looks permanently and horribly unwell) and begins to pull free of the web of lies that has protected them for the first two centuries of their immortal lives against human persecution and misogynistic Volturi pursuers. It's a very Irish version of the myth, where you get turned not by being sexily bitten but by visiting a damp cave on a remote island in heavy rain as a folk remedy for

STDs. The screenplay is credited to Moira Buffini, whose play for teenagers *A Vampire Story* it very loosely adapts, but where the play turned on the unresolved ambiguity over whether Ronan's character was a real vampire or merely an abused teen retreating into a fantasy version of her story, Jordan's version thumpingly disambiguates and escalates the scenario with the director's trademark arc of damaged men and abused sex workers drawn into fragile fairytale courtships with overwrought pulp-thriller endings. But as with his best vamps on these changes (*Angel*, *Mona Lisa*, *Crying Game*, *Ondine*), the part before the ending touches hauntingly sad and lovely notes, with Ronan the most affecting yet of Jordan's faerie waifs, and the strange location mashup of Dublin and Hastings creating an eerie coastal nowhere, even if Jones' not-quite-anywhere accent and the waterfalls of digital blood don't altogether sustain the mood.

There's a poignant ache at the heart of Chris Wedge's otherwise unremarkable **EPIC**, which takes design inspiration but little else from William Joyce's picture book *The Leaf Men and the Brave Good Bugs*, casting Joyce's late daughter Mary Katherine as the new heroine (after she was bumped from the last Joyce adaptation *Rise of the Guardians*) in what here becomes a backyard *FernGully* eco-war between faerie warriors and a Sauronic warlord with an army of bugs who in this version are neither brave nor good. (The



DESPICABLE ME 2

natural world is divided on cuteness lines into good and evil, with reptiles, amphibians, and insects consigned to orkish anti-life, while anything with fur or feathers is by default on the side of nature and flowers.) After the fairy queen comes into heat and dies before her seed is fertilised, MK falls to earth in their tiny world and discovers a power to leap tall shrubs at a single bound, whereupon she becomes the little folk's saviour as she learns to fulfil her father's life work and sacrifice her future for her new people as he did. (Before: "You have a delusional belief in an advanced society of tiny people living in the woods and it ruined your career and your marriage." After: "Who gives up everything for a world that isn't even theirs? – My dad!") There's quite an amusing joke about fruit flies and plenty of 3D canopy action, but the plot relies on familiarity rather than novelty, and there's something rather distasteful in the healing of MK's grief for her late mom by the discovery that she was wrong to dump dad in the first place.

The need for a mom is more directly felt in **DESPICABLE ME 2**, which belatedly recognises that a bachelor male with an international criminal record is perhaps a slightly creepy choice of adoptive dad for a trio of adorable sisters, so that Kristen Wiig is now enlisted to voice a suitably quirk-festooned gadget girl with whom Gru can team up for awkward romance, 3D espionage-related knockabout,

gratuitous musical numbers, and drop-in comedy routines at every opportunity from the series' undisputed animation gold, Gru's legion of cartoon-yellow Minions. The very intermittent plot, about unmasking an undercover supervillain among the unit-holders in a mall, feels like a spinoff minigame that has invaded the main feature, and doesn't even bother with the obvious twists (they're *all* supervillains, it's the old flower lady they dismiss at once, Margo's dim-seeming Latin boyfriend is secretly the criminal mastermind, &c., &c.). But as a film for very young children it's a work of purest brilliance, with the Minions' gibbering slapstick and little Agnes' adorability both ramped up to eleventy-eleven, and an unprecedented film-wide ban on threat, emotional manipulation, and nauseous personal-growth formula. Though the villain turns out to be raising an army of psychotic purple Minions, they're easily seen off by little girls squirting them with jelly guns that turn them back to a harmless yellow; and even the adult world celebrates a vision of glamour as ugly and strange-looking weirdos as oddly but more deeply beautiful.

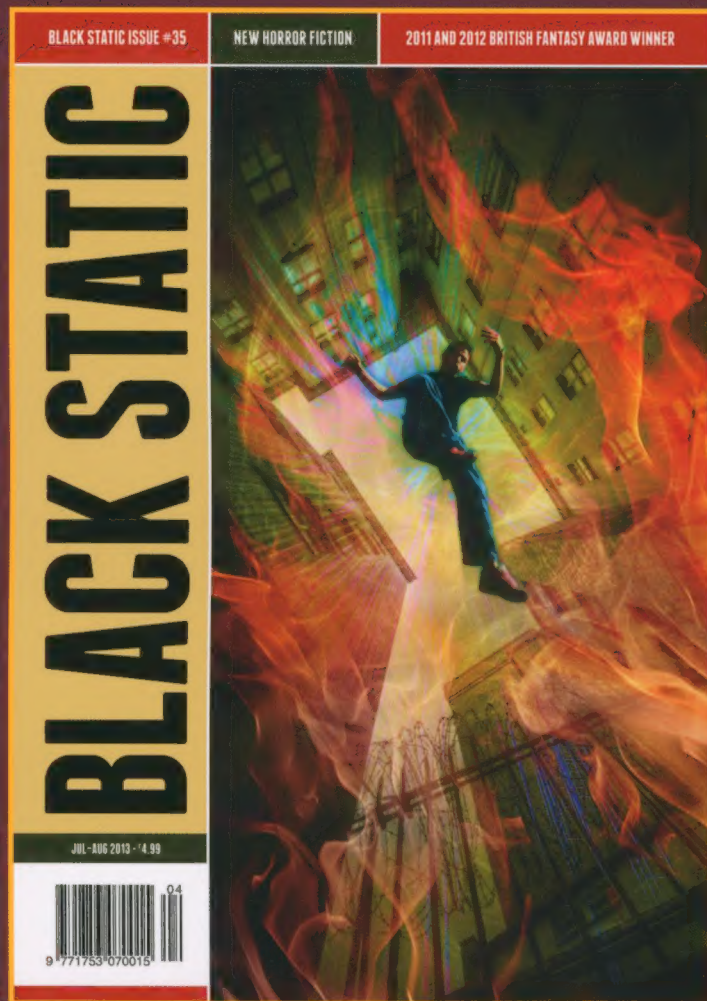
Much of the same familial plot is played out in desperately belated toy movie **ROBOSAPIEN**, improbably produced five years ago by Marvel Studios CEO Avi Arad, and on the shelf so long that it had to be launched in the US as *Robosapien: Rebooted* (confusingly sounding like a



ROBOSAPIEN

sequel to something you missed first time around), while even the UK version is re-retitled *Cody the Robosapien* on the actual screen. Director Sean McNamara specialises in films for audiences below the age of discernment (he previously did *Bratz* for Arad and has two *Baby Geniuses* sequels in the pipeline, which gives you some idea), and he's certainly on safe ground with *Robosapien*, which sees a prototype search-and-rescue droid escape his boss's attempt to militarise him, and fall into the hands of a nine-year-old science-fair nerd, whereupon the annoying robotyke demonstrates how owning a dancing toy robot will not only compensate kids for the lack of a father but make them popular at school and attractive to the opposite sex, see off bullies, tidy the house, pimp the car, heal relations with mother and sister ("Cody's the best thing that ever happened to us. He's brought me and my kids closer than we've ever been"), and win you a real-life dad who is cooler than your no-good bolter of a birth father who "was a jerk even when he was around". None of this would merit much attention from the over-sixes, particularly years after its product was hot, but for the breaking news that McNamara has now been recruited by Rick Santorum's faith-based production company EchoLight to make Christian-compliant entertainment for the families of the future. WowWee's boy of steel may not look like much, but have faith in him as your personal saviour and he'll be father to the man of tomorrow.

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